

## **ICC Citizenship Ceremony – Vancouver, 1 March 2007**

**Hosted by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship**

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Every year in Canada some 250,000 people - like you - are sworn in as new citizens. I have been at citizenship ceremonies all over the country, from the Yukon to Halifax. And I've seen that all of us, new and established citizens, treat this as a normal part of Canadian life. And it is normal. And it should be normal. But it is also amazing - amazing as an inclusive and dramatized approach towards citizenship. As I've watched you going by today and chatted with you, I have been struck yet again by the obvious fact that each one of you has a very different story and each one of you has the possibility of making a contribution to this country.

You're already making a contribution because you've already been here for several years. What I am talking about is the kind of contribution you can make now that you are assuming the full obligations of Canadian citizenship. I don't know what that contribution is going to be and perhaps you don't know yet. Some of you are students, and so there's no reason why you would know what shape your life is going to take. And many of you have only been here four or five years. Why should you know already precisely what kind of thoughts you're going to have on politics or public affairs and what kind of role you might wish to play in the public life of Canada, whether at the street level, or the community level or the provincial or national level? All of this will evolve and emerge with time.

There are people in other countries who are always worrying about the percentage of immigrants coming into their country. It's as if they don't know how to let go and ask themselves a very basic question - 'Wouldn't it be interesting to see what would happen if people came from all over the world to help build their country and to make it a better country?' In a way that's the secret of the Canadian success - the ability to let go and to ask that question. If we think the best of people who want to come to our country then we are encouraging an atmosphere in which it's pretty certain that they - you - are going to do their best.

For one hour, just before this ceremony, we all took part in a roundtable. What were we doing? We were chatting about citizenship. I think the established citizens learned as much from the new citizens as the new citizens learned from the established citizens. That roundtable was a small part of what the Institute for Canadian Citizenship is trying to do in partnership with Citizenship and Immigration and the Citizenship Judges and the volunteer committees we are setting up all across the country. What we're working on is how to ensure that all of you will find a way to get engaged. Perhaps we can help you to get engaged faster. I know that if you have become citizens it's because you would like to become engaged in building the country. But of course there are all sorts of visible and invisible barriers. Many of them are not created out of ill will, they are just old fashioned habit. And we know that there are some real problems surrounding job credentials. We certainly don't want you to lose, or this country to lose, the value of the talents that you have to offer to our democracy. But at the core of all these conversations is the fact that you now bear part of the weight of our shared democracy on your shoulders in exactly the same way that somebody like me who can claim descent from 225 years of citizenship in this country must carry part of that burden.

In a sense it doesn't really matter why or how you came to Canada. Some of you will have come without money, some with money, without education or with education, from a stable country or a country in civil war. In all of those cases, the central point is that the decision to change your country, to change your citizenship, requires enormous courage. You come to us having demonstrated your courage, and I don't think this is said enough by the people born here. To pick up and change the place you live, the way you live and the people you live with and the way you're going to identify yourself and imagine yourself - all of that requires courage. This can also mean suffering a great deal of loneliness because you have come here alone or because your families are not here or are not yet here. In other words immigrating and becoming a citizen can be very tough and very lonely. Whenever I hear people talking about how wonderful it is for immigrants to come to Canada I try to point out the underlying courage that this sort of change requires. Of course it should be wonderful to come here and become a citizen. But that doesn't mean that there wasn't a wrenching decision and a difficult period of life to be lived in making the decision to become the citizen of another country. From our point of view - those of us already established - there's a great advantage to us in this process: you arrive having already proven yourself to be people of great courage. I was born here and I didn't have to prove anything in order to become a Canadian citizen.

There is another thing which isn't said enough. In order to make the decision to change countries you had to talk about it and to decide. There was nothing accidental about this choice. It was a conscious choice. Many of us who are born in our country are able to float through life. Of course we don't entirely float, but there is a level of unconsciousness which we never have to deal with. People like you, who have chosen to come here, are more conscious of yourself and your families and the risks of life. You are therefore more conscious of what this country is like than many Canadians who are lucky enough to have been born here. That consciousness is a valuable quality which you bring to this country.

At first you may not want to mention the things that you've noticed and that you feel don't work right, because you're feeling polite and shy as a brand new member of this society. But it's important for you to speak up and talk about what you notice in the society of which you are a citizen. It doesn't mean that everyone's going to agree with you. In fact, it doesn't mean that anybody's going to agree with you. That's one of the peculiarities of a democracy. But it's very important to speak up and be heard and to hear other people's reactions to your thoughts.

What is going to happen to you in Canada? Each one of you will have a different experience. What you will have in common is this. You will leave behind part of what you were. But you will also bring part of what you were with you. And you will keep that. You keep certain things and you give up certain things. And in the process you are changed, and Canada also is changed. You will be changed by Canada and you will change Canada. Your children will be affected in a different way because they are going to go to public schools and they are meeting other kids from other communities. They may well marry people who come from communities very different from your own. There is no way of knowing that now. That is simply part of coming to Canada and becoming part of our society. All of that is the originality of the long standing Canadian experiment.

Some of the things you brought with you in your personality and your experience are going to be incredibly valuable to this country and a great deal of what you find here is going to be valuable to you. You are exactly like the history of this country, a very long lived and very stable democratic country and yet one which is changing all the time.

Let me say a few things about this country. People often talk about Canadian values and it is not clear what they mean. For example, each time you hear a public figure saying in a speech that this is a new country, you should give them a hard time. This is not a new country. We have thousands of years of experience from the Aboriginal peoples. We have over 400 years of experience during which the Aboriginals worked with the Francophone and Anglophone and then came hundreds of other waves of immigrants, like all of us. Four hundred years. A long history. The structure by which we put this country together stretches right back through those four centuries. It is built on what I call the triangular foundation of Aboriginals, Francophones and Anglophones- 400 years for them to gradually work out how to live together. It wasn't always a happy story. It wasn't always easy. There were some dark moments. But that three sided foundation has become the basis of the country. It was upon that foundation that we have added wave after wave of immigrants over the centuries. It's as if we've been building a gigantic skyscraper with strong foundations and floor after floor of new arrivals. None of that means that anybody has to stay in the part of the building in which they arrived. There are lots of elevators and staircases going up and down and kids running up and down going to school with people on other floors, marrying people on other floors, speaking out in public with people on other floors. So this is a stable country and this is a highly original evolving experiment in how to run a country.

We are not new. We are one of the world's oldest continuous democratic federations - **since 1848**. And one of the things which makes us so unusual is that we are a permanent experiment in how people, all of us, can live together. We're trying to do something here which nobody has ever tried to do before. This is a society built on complexity, an atypical society.

Most other modern nation states have been built on a monolithic idea - you know what I mean, the idea of a single race, single religion, single mythology. This is a country built on a non-monolithic idea, multiple races and religions and regions and mythologies. Somehow it all works together.

Finally, you often hear people say that we are a small country because we have 30 odd million people and live next door to the most powerful country in the world with 300 odd million people. This is nonsense. 30 million isn't a bad number. It's a lot of people. Besides, we're the second largest landmass in the world. In per capita terms, we are probably the largest middle class country in the world. And that makes us a very important experiment at the international level.

Most of us live in cities like Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto and Montreal so we live in a very intense urban relationship with each other. But it isn't just about us. It's about us and the place. This is a country where the place is as important as the people. This is not simply because we live off the natural resources of the place - a third of our GDP comes out of the non-urban. It comes out of commodities. Many people think there's a contradiction between where Canadians live and the kind of country we have. But there's only a contradiction if you look at us in classic U.S or European terms. What's interesting here is that there is a constant and positive tension between the people and the place. That's the only way in which we can imagine this country.

It will be difficult for those of you who have come straight to a big city to imagine what the rest of the country could be like. You might even think when you hear people talk about the north or the wilderness that they are being romantic. But it isn't romantic. That is the reality of Canada's gigantic landmass. Adrienne and I have been lucky enough to see more of it than perhaps any other living person. And I can tell you that what lies outside of the big cities is an amazing and unique place. And all of that is now yours.

Three comments about citizenship. Citizenship is not a buffet table, or a smorgasbord. None of us can go out and choose the bits we like from citizenship and leave out the bits we don't like. Of course there are some wonderful things attached to Canadian citizenship and there are some wonderful bits of history, just as there are some unpleasant bits. The moment you are sworn in as a Canadian citizen you inherit the total basket of Canadian history and Canadian citizenship. You are now responsible, not just for the good things but for all the mistakes we've made. The fact that you weren't here when we made those mistakes doesn't let you out of responsibility. In other words, you now bear part of our national responsibility for how badly we treated the aboriginals, for long periods of anti-Semitism, for the head tax, and for what was done to the Japanese. You are as responsible as any of us because you are now Canadian citizens. It's part of the package. You may well say that that's not fair, but who said it was fair. It just comes with the citizenship. The great thing about this is that because most of you are reasonably new arrivals you may be able to help the country find its way through the difficulties of its past history. The very fact that you weren't here means that you may have some fresh ideas about how we can go about making things work better with the Aboriginal peoples. Many of our solutions to past problems have indeed come from newer Canadians.

The second comment is this. The heart of Canadian citizenship has been an ongoing battle for egalitarianism and justice. It has always been there. It has always been clearly expressed by our most interesting leaders. It is built into the very heart of our Charter of Rights. This concept of equality is all about fairness and inclusion. Everyday when you wake up and go out your door you will join the rest of Canada in struggling for justice and equality. It will never be over. When you die, it will not be over. But that struggle for justice and equality lies at the heart of your citizenship.

And third, I want to come back to the question of place and to the responsibility you now share with all of us for this enormous place. You may always live in downtown Vancouver, but just as you have inherited our history, so you've inherited responsibility for the whole of the country. Iqaluit is as much a part of your citizenship as Vancouver. You may never go there. I certainly hope that you will. In fact you may well go and live there. Vancouver is a wonderful city but you may decide eventually to go and live in the Yukon or in a small city like Prince George or Prince Rupert. There are thousands of places you can go and live in Canada. Many of you are still working out how you're going to live here and that means you are still working out where you're going to live.

Wherever you settle down, remember that only a short distance away there lie other faces of Canada. I know that many of you will be working incredibly long hours to make your place in this country. But to the extent that you can, take the time to go and look around and find out what the rest of country looks like. Try to make sure that your children go as far as possible in the country. To the north, to the east. It's important to understand how much variety there is in your country. Remember, no matter how hard you're working, the pleasures which the Canadians who came before you have taken from spending some of their free time outside of the cities in different parts of the country, that pleasure and that privilege is also yours, it's part of taking ownership over the rest of the country. It's yours to make yours.

We are very proud that you have accepted our invitation to Canada. We are proud that you have decided to join us by becoming citizens. We are proud that you wanted to become part of the incredibly complicated group of people, which we are. We are a peculiar and complicated group of people. But that's all right. Originality is a great force. We know that you are going to



work as hard as you can to raise your families, and to make your life. But seize as much as you can as soon as you can the full obligations of citizenship.

Obligation. What does that mean? It means building justice. It means building equality. It means building the place. That's what obligation means. And we hope that you will understand that as part of your citizenship.

The most basic thing to do is to get out and vote. But voting is like punctuation. The sentences of democracy are involvement. The full obligation is involvement. Obligation is all about speaking up about the things you notice. Obligation is about taking part.

Volunteer in your community. Some of you already are, but let me repeat it. Volunteer in your community. That's how Canadian democracy works, by people volunteering. Support your public schools. Help build the public services in your neighbourhoods and municipalities. And speak up. Be heard. Say what you've got to say and be ready to listen to what other people say. Get engaged because this is your country now.