

Some thoughts about Canadian citizenship

Law Now

July-August, 2008

The theme of this issue of LAW NOW magazine is citizenship. Here are some things I said to a room filled with new Canadians moments after they were sworn in at a Citizenship Ceremony in Vancouver in 2007.

First, 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. Citizenship is a fundamental obligation. It is a matter of both responsibilities and rights. It includes the full weight of our experience, our history. 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 become a Canadian citizen you inherit the total basket of Canadian history and Canadian citizenship. You are responsible, not just for the good things but for all the mistakes we've made. The fact that you might not have been here when we made those mistakes doesn't let you out of responsibility. In other words, you 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 responsible because you are a Canadian citizen. 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 citizenship. The great thing about this is that you can help the country find its way through the difficulties of past history. The very fact that maybe 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. Every day 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 citizenship.

And third, I want to address the question of place and of the responsibility you share with all of us for this enormous place. You may always live downtown in one of our cities, 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 here. There are thousand of places you can go and live in Canada. Wherever you live, remember that only a short distance away there lie other faces of Canada. Take time to go and look around and find out what the rest of the country looks like. It's important to understand how much variety there is in the country. The pleasures that Canadians who came before you have taken from spending time 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.

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

The most basic thing all of us have 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.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

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John Ralston Saul is co-chair of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, along with former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson. The Institute works to promote active and engaged citizenship among new and established Canadians. For more information on the Institute and the full text of the speech, please visit www.icc.ca.