

We should be proud of Canadians abroad

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Where in the world is Canada? Canadians in North Africa have recently asked that question with urgency, awaiting the airlift promised by their passports.

As their fellow citizens, we are concerned and captivated by their situation. Likewise, our thoughts turned to our expatriates in Japan after last week's devastating earthquake and tsunami there. When Canadians abroad are in trouble, the rest of us do not simply watch from the sidelines; Canada is a global society, and their drama implicates us all.

In a crisis, we perceive our expatriates as a liability -as a financial and emotional burden on the Canadian taxpayer. This is an error. Canadians abroad can be an asset to our society and our economy, if we engage them effectively.

A new report, published by the Action Canada Task Force on Expatriate Engagement, provides a powerful framework for doing so.

In its report, the Task Force makes two key recommendations. First, that the federal government fund and publish a comprehensive survey of Canada's expatriate population. No such survey presently exists. Our best estimates tell us that nearly three million Canadians live abroad. That's almost 10 per cent of the total. If our expatriates were a province, they would be more populous than Saskatchewan, Manitoba, or all of Atlantic Canada combined.

Canadians abroad are connected to networks of business, commerce, and trade that span the globe. The chief business officer of the World Economic Forum is Canadian. The chief financial officer of Google is Canadian. So is the former managing director of al Jazeera English, whose reach in the Arab world is being highlighted by current events.

Canadians abroad take their skills with them. More than half of the Canadians living in the United States, aged 25 or older, have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to one-fifth of Canadian residents in the same age group. Among those with doctoral or professional degrees, the disparity is even greater. These are some of our best and brightest, and research by the Asia Pacific Foundation suggests that they feel strongly about their citizenship. We should share these Canadians proudly with the world, but we can also benefit from their talents ourselves.

Imagine if we could connect these global Canadians to Canadian businesses and governments seeking to expand abroad. There are already many connections in the arts between Canadians at home and abroad; imagine if we built similar connections in business. Imagine the potential for partnerships, business deals, and good advice, all of it shared between fellow citizens for mutual benefit.

Such a network could change the way Canadians project ourselves as global citizens, and it could transform the relationship between Canada itself and our citizens abroad. This is the impetus for

the Action Canada Task Force's second recommendation, that the federal government seek a public-private partnership to build a global business network of Canadians abroad.

Other jurisdictions have figured out the value of such an expatriate network. Australia, Mexico, Scotland, and other jurisdictions have all built connections to their citizens abroad, including in Canada. We should learn from their example, so we can reap the rewards that they have; the Scottish expatriate network, for instance, generated more than 28 million for the Scottish economy during a two-year period, between 2004 and 2006.

The tumult in Libya put the plight of expatriates back onto the nightly news. But we are a confident people, and few of us doubted that the planes would eventually take off, and our citizens would be returned safely to their loved ones. But then, as quickly as they appeared, our expatriates will vanish from the foreground of our national consciousness.

We must not let this happen. Our fellow citizens are our greatest resource. Our country will only reach our potential if we engage all our people, no matter where they live, in the unfinished business of building our economy.

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