



Institute
for Canadian
Citizenship

Institut pour
la citoyenneté
canadienne

www.inclusion.ca

[@inclusion_ca](https://twitter.com/inclusion_ca)

[f](https://www.facebook.com/inclusion.ca) [@inclusion.ca](https://www.instagram.com/inclusion.ca)

#IChoseCanada

#CanadaEstMonChoix

John Ralston Saul

Speech at the Sharon Temple Citizenship Ceremony

August 14, 2019

We began the day with a land acknowledgment. This is a protocol, a way of opening our public ceremonies all over Canada. These protocols remind us of many things. That there is more to land than simple ownership.

There is the power of history and memory. There is the responsibility we all bear. And the respect. The Indigenous peoples give full meaning to that history, memory, responsibility and respect.

This Sharon Temple stands at the heart of a rich farming area. And so for thousands of years people here have known that we are held together by our relationship with the land.

The land acknowledgment is also a reminder that from the late 16th century to the mid-19th, immigrants to Canada were dependent on Indigenous people. Or partners with them. For almost 300 years. A long time. Then, in the mid-19th century, the newcomers began to betray those relationships. Terrible things were done. Now we are trying to put that relationship back together again.

That is part of the history and responsibility you take on as citizens. You must be part of rebuilding that relationship.

But 300 years of immigrant dependency and partnership was a long time. And so Indigenous people have had an enormous influence on how Canada was built. On how we do things. They welcomed us into their circles. They taught us that inclusion and diversity were possible.

That idea of welcoming newcomers into our circle, so important to Canadian citizenship, we owe to the Indigenous peoples. This is part of why our system works.

And one of the results is that “immigrant” is among the most noble words in the Canadian vocabulary.

Almost one percent of our population arrives every year. 86% of immigrants become citizens within five years. In the United States it is 40%. In Europe, a very low number.

To put it simply. A landed immigrant becomes engaged to the country. Five years later, they get married.

This is a Canadian philosophy. We wanted you to become citizens as fast as possible so that you could help carry the weight of citizenship – so that you could become fully engaged in our – your –

society. Working for the public good. Volunteering. Becoming involved in politics. Playing a role in shaping Canada's culture. After all, a culture which is alive is never fully shaped. It is always growing and reimagining itself.

Volunteering and cultural involvement. These are the two fastest passageways to the heart of the country. And to playing a role which will strengthen Canada.

That's why the ICC program – CANOO – is so important. It opens the doors for new citizens to over 1,400 cultural institutions. And to the performing arts.

The Sharon Temple is a member of CANOO. If you look around and up you see a beautiful building. Almost two centuries old. There is something mystical about it because it was built according to mysterious calculations we don't really understand.

This beauty is intimately tied to the story of Canadian democracy and citizenship. And now you are becoming part of that story.

The Children of Peace, under the leadership of David Willson, built the Temple in the 1820s. They were incredibly successful farmers who believed in egalitarianism. They created Canada's first agricultural co-op and first cooperative bank. Any farmer could join and so protect themselves from the disastrous, unregulated financing systems of the day.

The Children of Peace were strong believers in democracy and opponents of the anti-democratic colonial elite – the family compact.

In 1840 the struggle began for what we would recognize as modern Canadian democracy. There had been disastrous uprisings across the Canada's in 1837, violence, marshall law.

And then in 1840, the young leader of the Lower Canadian democrats, Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine from Montreal, was introduced to the leader of the Upper Canadian democrats, a young Torontonian, Robert Baldwin. They met in Toronto and agreed to work together. Baldwin, an anglophone protestant, insisted that LaFontaine, a francophone catholic, be the leader. Their ambition was to gain Responsible Government – the rule of parliament. Democracy. This had never before been accomplished by a colony without going to war against the imperial power.

LaFontaine brought the democratic forces together with a public declaration – one of the most important in Canada's history - L'Adresse aux Electeurs de Terrebonne. The Address to the Electors of Terrebonne. In it he called for immigrants to come to Canada "from around the globe." "Their children," he said, "must be, like us, Canadians" This was the beginning of our immigration and citizenship policy, 180 years ago.

And he said something else key to our society. We can be denied our political liberty – our democracy – only if we let go of "that social equality which constitutes the distinctive characteristic" of our society. You see, this theme of egalitarianism keeps coming up when we talk about our ambitions for Canada.



LaFontaine and Baldwin set about talking their way out of the British Empire. Now you know why Canadians give so many speeches. The odds were not in their favour. They brought their movement together in a modern organization – the Reform Party. And they based their campaign on the need for hundreds of reforms – municipal democracy, the secret ballot, decentralized justice, trial by jury, a professional civil service, and on and on.

The first election was in 1841. The Governor General – not a good one - and the Family Compact did everything they could to stop the democratic movement. On voting day the Governor General sent 700 men with clubs and rifles to LaFontaine's riding of Terrebonne near Montreal. LaFontaine had to withdraw as a candidate to avoid bloodshed.

He and Baldwin, again and again, would use restraint in order to keep the country together. A country built on diversity could – and can - only work if everyone restrains themselves. This has become part of our culture.

The democratic forces more or less won the election, but LaFontaine, their leader, had no seat. In those days you could run in two ridings, and if you were victorious in both there would be a by-election in one. Baldwin had done this. He had won near Belleville and here in North York, thanks to the leadership of the Children of Peace.

So he did something remarkable in those days of religious and linguistic animosity and violence. He invited LaFontaine to run here, in unilingual, protestant Ontario. This was a revolutionary idea.

And so late at night on September 3rd, 1841, LaFontaine arrived at the Sharon Temple after a twelve hour muddy coach ride from Toronto. The Temple was all lit up with hundreds of candles for their annual gathering. The women took part in their discussions – including the political meetings. Baldwin's father, who was also a famous figure, brought LaFontaine in and introduced him.

You can imagine! They had probably never seen a francophone or a catholic before. But they took him on. In the words of their leader: "as justice has been denied to the Lower Canadians, we will support Mr. L." In a sense, the Canadian idea of diversity as a strength was born here in this hall, that night. This was a turning point for Canadian democracy.

Seven years later LaFontaine was Prime Minister, and formed a government with Baldwin. The first of its kind in any of the empires. The first legislative act they put before parliament created an immigration system, in good part to protect defenseless immigrants. That was 171 years ago. We can say now that Canada is the oldest continuous democratic federation in the world.

So there you have a bit of the story. Those were dangerous times. For the Children of Peace, LaFontaine, Baldwin and their followers, all of this took a lot of courage. Democracy is built by both courage and restraint every day.

And that is something we don't say often enough about those who immigrate to Canada – that you bring with you essential characteristics and experiences which have prepared you to be strong citizens.



After all, you decided to come here. It can only be a difficult decision to change countries. To start again.

It is proof of courage and of consciousness and of a capacity to act.

Courage, consciousness, the ability to act. These are essential characteristics of an engaged citizen.

The desire to better your life, and that of your family must mean a desire to strengthen your new country.

* * *

We are very proud that you accepted our invitation to come to Canada to become Canadian citizens.

This is an old and stable civilization, yet one we are continually building.

Of course, you will work hard. You will build new lives. You already are.

But just as important, seize the full obligations – the responsibilities of citizenship – as fast as you can.

Of course, voting is going to be central to your new life. Go out and vote at every level, from school boards to federal elections. But remember this, voting is just the punctuation – the periods and commas of democracy. The democratic sentence is all about getting involved – engaged – speaking out, being visible in whatever way suits you. The real language of democracy is participation, joining, supporting others.

Freedom of expression lies at the heart of all of this. And freedom of expression is both essential and complicated. It requires tough skin, but equally it involves showing respect for others. Listening. And always looking for ways for all of us to live together.

Above all – volunteer. This is the way into full citizenship. Volunteerism in Canada is another way of saying that you are engaged citizens.

Volunteer in your communities. Support your local public school. Canadian citizenship and democracy were built together with our public school system. Democracy and public education were part of the same struggle from 1840 on.

Help build the public services in your community. Support your neighborhoods.

Speak up. Be heard. But also listen.

Be engaged.

This is your country now.

