



Canadian values, eh!

What are they ... do they matter ... and how does multiculturalism fit in?

BY LISA EVANS

Think of Canada, and a few images quickly come to mind: the red maple leaf, a Mountie, the beaver, the mighty moose, a hockey stick, maple syrup and let's not forget the coffee-lovers' favourite double-double. But these are just symbols ... what about Canadian values? This question often brings up answers like peace, equality, freedom.

Tommy Zablan, a photographer based in Vancouver who immigrated from Philippines 10 years ago this August, just received his citizenship, and had to study up on what it means to be Canadian. "I got an entire book about Canadian symbols before my citizenship ceremony," he says with a laugh. At the ceremony itself, Zablan was proud to become a Canadian with people from all over the world. "We all said the same oath, the pledge to the Queen," he adds. But beyond the ceremonial stuff, Zablan says that the key value he thinks of as Canadian is "tolerance" of others.

Is it ironic then that recent actions by the federal government to strengthen the citizenship act seem to narrow what it means to be Canadian?

Citizenship changes

On Feb. 6, Canada's Citizenship and Immigration Minister Chris Alexander unveiled the Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act, also known as Bill C-24. The bill is the country's first attempt at overhaul-

ing citizenship laws since 1977. While Alexander says the changes will protect the value of Canadian citizenship, there's concern from political observers and those who work in and study immigration policy that the new reforms mean Canada's government is shifting away from the open-door, multicultural policies of the past and narrowing the meaning of what it means to be Canadian.

One of the biggest changes is an increase in the wait time for residents who want to apply for citizenship. Under previous rules, applicants were required to have residence in Canada for three out of four years, but there was no rule about how much time they spent physically in the country. The new rules allow residents to apply after four years of residency in a six-year period, but states they must physically be present in the country for a minimum of half the time in four of those years, under the premise that spending a longer period of time in Canada better supports integration of newcomers in Canadian society.

Language requirements will also be stiffer. While under the previous rules, applicants between the ages of 18 to 54 were required to speak English or French and pass a Canadian knowledge test, with the help of an interpreter if needed. That age range has now broadened to 14 to 64 and interpreters will no longer be allowed. "Our government expects new Canadians to take part in the democratic life, economic potential and the rich cultural traditions that are involved in becoming a citizen," said Alexander when Bill C-24 was introduced.

The language of the new policy has some immigration scholars worried. Legislation that calls for potential citizens to adhere more to Canadian values sends the message that Canadians are concerned newcomers aren't Canadian enough and that the government has a monopoly on the decision of what Canadian national values are and what it means to belong in the country.

So, what exactly are Canadian values?

“ If you look at the data on immigrants before the policy was enacted, Canada has an exceptional rate of integration and language literacy. So it becomes questionable, why do we need to bring in a new policy to emphasize things that already exist?”

— Howard Ramos

Values defined

A national poll conducted in 2011 by Dalhousie researcher Howard Ramos, in conjunction with the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, found Canadians valued gender equality, freedom of religion and tolerance of others. While 97 per cent of Canadians said adopting these values should be a condition of being granted citizenship, what was surprising to Ramos was that 96 per cent of immigrants agreed, showing immigrants have already adopted these “Canadian values” and are already well integrated into Canadian society.

Henry Malachite Busili, who immigrated to Canada from Zambia in 2007, says he considers equality and respect to be Canadian values, and agrees the government has the right to expect immigrants to adopt these values. “In order to maintain the moral fabric of the country, immigrants must agree to uphold the common standard of behaviour,” he says. Yet, he also states part of what makes Canada unique is the fact that immigrants bring their own set of ideas and values to the country. “Part of Canadian values is to respect cultural differences,” he says.

Jack Jedwab, executive director of the Montreal-based think tank Association for Canadian Studies, says it's not entirely clear what Canadian values are. “When people think of values, they often think of such things as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,” he says. While Jedwab says it's not wrong to try to define a set of shared principles or national values, he warns that having a national debate about values can be a dangerous practice.

“In terms of what I've seen by

way of examples of other places doing it and more recently Quebec, it's not a healthy exercise,” he says. Jedwab has been vocal against the Quebec Charter of Values, a proposed bill by the governing Parti Québécois that includes prohibitions of public sector employees from wearing or displaying “conspicuous” religious symbols such as turbans, hijabs or large crosses and religious pendants.

Other research has shown a lack of consensus among Canadians that values should be part of the immigration and citizenship discussion. A 2013 survey conducted by Forum Research revealed 49 per cent of Canadians feel the country should only accept immigrants from countries that share the same values, while 43 per cent were in favour of admitting immigrants from all nations. This

data surprised some researchers since Canada has long been praised in the international sphere as non-discriminatory regarding which countries immigrants are accepted from, relying more on eligibility criteria such as education and work experience. At least, that was the thinking behind the points system,



Tommy Zablan and his 23-month-old daughter, Nanami, get into the Canadian spirit!

Photos by Tommy Zablan Imaging



which focused on objective criteria including skills and education. The new shift in policy is seen by some as putting subjectivity back into immigration policy, which has some worried it could hinder the ongoing development of Canada's culture.

Cultural shift

Are such new policies in danger of making Canada xenophobic?

Elke Winter, a professor at the University of Ottawa, who studies issues of immigration, multiculturalism and national identity, is troubled by the new language in which Canadian citizenship is being presented.

For example, the bill will allow the government to revoke citizenship from individuals with dual nationalities if they are found to have taken part in a terrorist attack or if they obtained citizenship under false pretenses. And the power to strip citizenship would be up to the minister, rather than the courts.

Winter argues legislation that depicts prospective citizens as poten-

tially fraudulent can create an atmosphere of insecurity and distrust. She also worries that the language of these policies are singling out specific regions and cultures as potentially less adaptable than others, and worries these messages may be counterproductive to the successful integration of immigrants from diverse backgrounds. "If you depict others as fraudulent, you create anxiety," she says. "[The language of these policies] isn't helpful to creating a mutual trust between newcomer and established residents," says Winter.

Ronica Sanjay, who immigrated to Canada from India in 1978, says she fears the new legislation will put Canada in the position following the pattern of other countries that are becoming more xenophobic. "I find it very disturbing despite the fact that in Canada we are from many different countries and have come here because of tribulation in our home countries, we suddenly [feel the need to be] protectionist. Why are we threatened? What else are we going to be told that we need to [protect] or exclude?" she asks.

Ramos, too, says he's concerned the language of Bill C-24 is stoking fears. "There's a fear that people are buying passports, that they're not learning the language, that they don't know the language of the country, so the citizenship test now puts more emphasis on language and history, but if you look at the data on immigrants before the policy was enacted, Canada has an exceptional rate of integration and language literacy. So it becomes questionable, why do we need to bring in a new policy to emphasize things that already exist?" asks Ramos.

While the scholars interviewed for this article agree it's important for Canada to respect and maintain its traditions, they worry about the risk legislating culture carries in terms of promoting racism and xenophobia in the name of protecting our values — values which include multiculturalism.

"Culture and values are living things," says Ramos. Being an immigrant country means embracing change. "[What] I worry about in terms of this new focus on values is that it loses sight of the dynamism that exists in terms of the change of a living culture," says Ramos. 🍁



ACCES 
EMPLOYMENT
Making Connections

**Are you
looking for a job?**

We offer a range of free employment services:

- Specialized services for Internationally Trained Professionals
- Direct connections with employers
- Recruitment and mentorship events and programs
- Talk English Café™ – provides an interactive environment to practice workplace communication skills
- Career planning, Canadian labour market information and job trends
- Resume development, interview practice and coaching on how to market yourself to employers
- Access to computers, internet and telephones at each of our locations







416-921-1800
acesemployment.ca