

EDITORIAL: WHO SHOULD BE A CITIZEN?

By Leslie H. Morley*

ALFRED GILPIN JONES, the Halifax merchant, Member of Parliament and Lieutenant Governor, is remembered as having said “I am a Nova Scotian by birth but a Canadian by Act of Parliament”. His words remind us that citizenship is a status conferred upon us not only by virtue of our birth place and parentage, but also by law.

Yet this is not the end of the story, for underlying the notion of citizenship status is another reality, one that is probably closer to what Jones was suggesting when he made his famous remark. It is a reality that is most tangible during international sporting competitions, for if a Canadian should score the winning goal, we all feel the thrill of the victory. Citizenship, it is then clear, captures an important aspect of the personal identity of each of us, as it represents the achievements, values and aspirations we proudly share with our national community.

As citizens, we have a personal stake in the future of Canada, and we are understandably interested in how one becomes a member of our exclusive club. So it is no surprise that ideas about how we might alter the process of becoming a citizen draw considerable interest, and impassioned debate. Recently, on our list serve, there was just such a debate. When one of us bemoaned the delays in processing citizenship residency questionnaires, another commented that it was time to do away with the residency obligation altogether. Naturally, a vigorous discussion ensued.

Should we do away with the residency obligation? One list mate suggested that the citizenship residency requirement be replaced with obligation to establish residency for income tax purposes. He commented that, were this to happen, we could celebrate the end of counting days spent in Canada, of unpredictable citizenship application outcomes, of residency hearings before the Citizenship Judge, of Federal Court applications, and of backlogs. Physical presence could be replaced with testing for knowledge of Canada and language skills. Income tax enforcement would be enhanced by information sharing with CIC. In committing to such a system, it was maintained, we would dispense with a muddled residency requirement, and replace it with a transparent and lucrative process that would attract to Canada the best and brightest from around the world.

Not so fast, said other list mates. Despite the position of the Canada Revenue Agency, there is more to being a Canadian than paying taxes. To really understand what it means to be one of us, one must rub shoulders with other Canadians, not merely sign our name to cheques. Canadian citizenship, in short, should not be sold for tax dollars. Who needs the best and the brightest, it was asked, if they cannot even bother to live here? Perhaps we should pick our citizens from the Third World, said one list mate, choosing our citizens from those who are motivated to contribute their time and energy to building the country, not just some money.

This is the more compelling argument. While establishing compliance with the residency requirement may be unpredictable and frustrating in some cases, these are relatively few and they should not cause us to debase the value of what we hold so dear. The best and the brightest will add little to our country if they are not committed enough to Canada to arrange their affairs so as to be able to meet some sort of residency requirement. After all, if the basis for Canadian citizenship is a financial investment, then citizenship itself becomes a commodity, and not an earned status which new citizens will seek to nourish and protect.

We should choose our immigrants from the best and brightest, of course, as well as from the persecuted, the skilled, and our extended families. However, our naturalized citizenry should come from those of our immigrants who, having lived amongst us, and having come to truly understand what it means to be a Canadian, are prepared to commit themselves and their future to this country. The best and the brightest will commit to Canada too if we enhance the value of citizenship by requiring those who seek it, to work for it.

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