

Some Thoughts on Canadian Citizenship

Earlier this month, I attended my younger sister's Canadian citizenship oath-taking ceremony. Our parents were then on vacation in the Philippines hence unable to witness this happy occasion. Nonetheless, it was quite obvious that for the dozens of oath-takers and their families inside the Scarborough court room, it was a momentous occasion. The citizenship judge was a wise and amiable man who identified himself as a Metis and who reminded the attendees of the rights and responsibilities which come with being a Canadian citizen. Aside from his fearless forecast that every new Canadian citizen will use a Canadian passport in their next foreign travel, he also asked the audience to recall the people who made them feel welcome in this country and to do the same for other newcomers whom they will happen to meet in the future.

An interesting part of the ceremony was when the citizenship judge announced the long list of countries represented in the room and asked those who came from each country to say the word "congratulations" in their own language. Some Filipinos in the audience could be heard whispering among themselves, "ano nga ba 'yun sa Tagalog?", eliciting responses such as "maligayang bati", "pagbati" or even, "kongrachuleyshons". In any case, this exercise not only provided a good icebreaker to an otherwise straightforward ceremony, but likewise emphasized the multicultural origins of Canadian citizenry. Undoubtedly, many of these naturalized Canadian citizens would still feel a stronger affinity to their home countries where they were raised and where their ancestors come from. However, the fact that they have also chosen to make Canada their new home is a reflection of their desire to take active part in Canadian society. At least, that is the hope and expectation that comes with the grant of citizenship. It is also hoped that once Canadian citizenship is obtained, people will not take for granted the rights and responsibilities that come with this privilege. These are summarized in the Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) website as follows:

"The Charter of Rights and Freedoms summarizes fundamental freedoms while also setting out additional rights. The most important of these include:

- **Mobility Rights** — Canadians can live and work anywhere they choose in Canada, enter and leave the country freely, and apply for a passport.
- **Aboriginal Peoples' Rights** — The rights guaranteed in the Charter will not adversely affect any treaty or other rights or freedoms of Aboriginal peoples.
- **Official Language Rights and Minority Language Educational Rights** — French and English have equal status in Parliament and throughout the government.
- **Multiculturalism** — A fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity. Canadians celebrate the gift of one another's presence and work hard to respect pluralism and live in harmony.

The responsibilities of Canadian citizens include:

- **Obeying the law** — One of Canada's founding principles is the rule of law. Individuals and governments are regulated by laws and not by arbitrary actions. No person or group is above the law.

- **Taking responsibility for oneself and one's family** — Getting a job, taking care of one's family, and working hard in keeping with one's abilities, are important Canadian values. Work contributes to personal dignity and self-respect, and to Canada's prosperity.
- **Serving on a jury** — When called to do so, you are legally required to serve. Serving on a jury is a privilege that makes the justice system work, as it depends on impartial juries made up of citizens.
- **Voting in elections** — The right to vote comes with a responsibility to vote in federal, provincial or territorial and local elections.
- **Helping others in the community** — Millions of volunteers freely donate their time to help others without pay—helping people in need, assisting at your child's school, volunteering at a food bank or other charity, or encouraging newcomers to integrate. Volunteering is an excellent way to gain useful skills and develop friends and contacts.
- **Protecting and enjoying our heritage and environment** — Every citizen has a role to play in avoiding waste and pollution while protecting Canada's natural, cultural, and architectural heritage for future generations.”

Despite all, one cannot help but feel a sense of discomfort when hearing stories of Canadian citizens who have never or hardly ever worked, paid taxes or contributed to the Canadian society and economy and yet manage to use the Canadian passport and claim citizenship rights. On the other hand, there are many members of society who quietly toil for Canadian families or Canadian companies, pay taxes and contribute heavily to the Canadian economy for decades, who are still considered undeserving to stay in Canada and are removed to their countries of origin despite strong evidence of establishment in this country.

The nature of my work allows me to meet many people who are more than deserving of Canadian citizenship but who have encountered many roadblocks on their way to achieving this dream. For this reason, it behooves us to continue to reflect on the true value of Canadian citizenship and why we need to categorize people's belonging in society through these legally created distinctions. After all, whether we are citizens, permanent residents, temporary residents or so-called undocumented or out of status, we are all human beings deserving of fundamental fairness, respect and dignity.

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