

**8th Annual Trudeau Conference on Public Policy 2011  
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**“The Making of Citizens: Beyond the Canadian Consensus on Immigration”**

The notion that *we are all immigrants* is embedded in the Canadian psyche. The First Peoples—with a relationship with the land that extends beyond memory, and being truly “autochthonous”—are still portrayed as the quintessential migrants, establishing the human race on the American continent. We like to tell ourselves that the first settlers, French or English, were just immigrants, first among successive waves of adoptive citizens. For many Canadians, immigration is a living, essential and often repeated part of their family’s history. Today, for one Canadian out of five, it is even a journey that has been directly experienced. *We are all immigrants*—it is a refrain that echoes from coast to coast, in rural and urban areas alike.

The Eighth Trudeau Conference on Public Policy will revisit the orthodoxy of a national consensus on immigration. The conference will provide an opportunity to reflect on crucial aspects of immigration and citizenship, dissect comfortable assumptions and alternative perspectives, and question policy narratives that have become all but clichés.

The dominant narrative in Canada is that our national experience with immigration is, for the most part, positive and unique. Even while remembering past episodes of racism and exclusion or forgiving current manifestations of intolerance against vulnerable migrants (such as refugees), the country appears to integrate large numbers of newcomers peacefully year after year. We are one of the few countries in the world that has not made assimilation of immigrants the ultimate end of its policies. Once they agree to participate in our most basic civic institutions as taxpayers or voters, if they obey the law and accept that transactions in the public sphere must conform to principles like those enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, “new” Canadians are free to develop their identity and conduct their life as they see fit. These two aspects—peaceful integration and non-assimilation—set Canadian experience apart from other countries.

Countries “make”, “produce” or “evolve” their citizens in one of two crucial ways: education or immigration. The strength of the Canadian approach, or so we have told ourselves, is the relative speed with which newcomers can integrate into the country, allowing them to participate, contribute and reap the benefits of the distribution of social and economic rewards that characterize a modern, advanced society. The vast majority of immigrants to Canada opt to become citizens in the few years that follow their settlement, encouraged by a system that promotes the acquisition of citizenship as a natural and desirable outcome, not unlike the manner in which the school system promotes the acquisition of diplomas and degrees.

In comparison with countries where citizenship rights are withheld from most immigrants, even those who have resided for many decades, this approach has evident benefits. Two thirds of newcomers to Canada are “economic immigrants,” selected through a point system that is supposed to address the needs of the Canadian economy. The stated goal is to quickly integrate these immigrants into the workforce and into society. The staged provision of legal and political rights logically follows. But is it enough?

Indeed, this sort of “weak” citizenship is under attack from many quarters. For some, it does not address the immigrant desire for social mobility. The point system that allows or denies entry does not necessarily reflect the reality of federal or provincial professional licensing regimes. Others lament the loss of a “national” project behind the granting of citizenship. For example, the 2009 edition of the federal study guide for prospective citizens conflates the acquisition of citizenship with meaningful adherence to a set of national values thought to reflect a common civic culture. Others lament the perceived exclusive attention of the policy to well-off immigrants, while more vulnerable refugees or temporary workers are left behind, with limited rights, hurdles to citizenship, and thus delayed integration into Canadian society.

The most pointed criticisms of “weak citizenship” come from those who argue that under the guise of multiculturalism, current policy has fostered the creation of ethnic and cultural ghettos. The same policy that creates “weak” citizens fosters the “strong” links of homogenous community identity, with all its consequences: segregation, isolation, tradition, and nostalgia . If the values of these communities conflict with the values of tolerance and openness that characterize the broader Canadian society, the former too often prevails upon the latter, putting at risk the rights, liberties or personal security of anyone daring to question traditional elements of these cultural identities. Nonetheless, most Canadians still believe immigration is positive and immigrant relationships with their native societies is a benefit for our country. In Western Europe and the United States, the loyalty and the social behaviour of certain groups of immigrants is aggressively questioned and acrimonies abound. Much of the world is becoming more and more fearful of multiple allegiances, dual citizenship and other signs of complex personal affiliations. Canadian experience is also evolving, as we debate the merits of allowing citizens from other cultural traditions to apply their own law rather than adhere to Canadian jurisprudence; or as policies regarding industry, trade, energy or environment get formulated with little reference to shared values that, a generation ago, would have dominated Canadian discourse.

These questions are here to stay. Demographers repeat that Canada has no choice but to pursue a deliberate policy of increasing immigration. Economists want Canada to continue to compete for the best minds and the skilled workers of the world, as employers will either get access to skilled workers here or move businesses to where they can find them. Environmentalists predict a huge increase in the number of refugees, as the result of climate change. International realities -- conflicts, fear, hunger, globalization and ambition --also impact migrations on a large scale. Thus it is clear that the politics of immigration will continue with or without a new policy framework, and that the Canadian consensus will need to adapt.

The Trudeau Conference on Public Policies will explore these questions, drawing on international experience and expertise. Conference participants will diagnose and describe problems that are often difficult to identify. They will consider policy options and opportunities. Above all, they will identify obstacles to evolution, and strategies for moving forward.

The Foundation themes of Human Rights and Dignity, Responsible Citizenship, Canada in the World, and People and Their Natural Environment will form the backbone of the conference. Canadian and international experts, practitioners and academics will address specific issues such as nation building, economic integration, pluralism, and dual citizenship, in 10 dialogue sessions that are the trademark of Trudeau Foundation conferences. As in previous years, Trudeau Foundation Scholars organize a Public Seminar immediately prior to the conference, exploring a number of additional perspectives directly linked to the conference theme.