



**Migrant Integration:  
A Matter of Mutual Accommodation**

**Notes for a Presentation**

**By**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Dear Howard, Fellow panelists, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a pleasure to be in Copenhagen, and I would like to thank the organizers for the invitation to speak at this Metropolis Conference. And I look forward to an animated and spirited discussion following our presentations.

My participation here today, brings back pleasant long and memories when, as Canadian Minister of Citizenship & Immigration, I was among those involved with the birth and launch of Metropolis. Since

then, it has travelled a successful road, and I believe we still have a good stretch of highway in front of us.

I also applaud the organizers for including the theme of democracy and diversity. Another way of articulating the same idea is through two other words: integration and accommodation.

We all know that migration is a powerful and emotional human phenomenon, which alters the destiny of both the individuals involved and the countries they adopt. In this process, the issue of integration is of fundamental importance in this process, and this has always been a central interest of mine ---whether it was in my role as a Commissioner for the Global Commission on International Migration, or as Canadian

Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, or simply, as a Canadian.

I have always believed that the quality of the integration process will greatly determine whether the migrant's journey, including future generations of their families, is a success or not. So, it is wise to take up this cause.

The write-up for this panel poses 3 critical questions, so let me briefly respond accordingly, and try to offer a Canadian perspective.

**First, what are we to make of the marriage between democracy and diversity?**

For me, migration is a two- sided coin. One side represents the opportunity for migrants to enter one's country. The flip side is the commitment by those countries to integrate the newcomers into the very heart of their societies. Without a genuine attempt to integrate the newcomers, the coin will be a more complicated and risky investment – for both the migrant and the host country.

In this sense, diversity enriches democracy, and acts as one of the sturdy pillars for the expanding society.

It also is a matter of common sense.

Why keep individuals as permanent tenants, when they could be encouraged to become landlords, and take greater responsibilities? After all;

- Denying migrants their full rights and opportunities will create tensions and frustrations between them and the existing population.
- Their marginalization as some ethnic under-class undermines their place in and contributions to, the nation.
- And if this situation goes unaddressed, it can eventually lead to the stratification of society into different classes and categories of people, depending on where you were born and when you arrived.

These are all dangerous seeds. If planted and allowed to grow, they can produce a harvest of social inequalities and divisions that has the potential of destabilizing the society, and creating untold costs in later years.

In other words, a perfect recipe for weakening and endangering the very fabric of democracy!

## **2. The second question was, whether political unity and identity should take precedence over cultural diversity?**

In this regard, if a society seeks harmony between its peoples --- which I hope all societies would --- I'm not convinced that there should be, or needs to be, any sense of precedence.

Rather, I view the political and cultural exponents as a relationship requiring mutual responsibility and recognition. In effect, a balanced and meaningful accommodation.

My point of reference is the Canadian experience, where millions upon millions of people from, all corners of the globe, have chosen to make Canada

their home. The migration chapter, without question, is an integral and moving part of the Canadian story.

Several key principles define this storyline:

- Canada views migration as a building block and not a mental block.
- Canada employs an immigration point system, and not one based on regional or ethnic quotas.
- In Canada, migration falls under the federal responsibility of the Department of Multiculturalism, Citizenship and Immigration, and not some security or interior ministry, which rightly
- or wrongly, perceptually builds on a negative stereotype.
- The national government, together with the cooperation of the provincial and municipal governments, makes a deliberate effort to integrate newcomers.
- Towards this end, we recognize migrants for who they are, and do not attempt to alter their personal DNA at the Canada Customs office.

- Multiculturalism, as an expression of celebrating differences and promoting pride in a mosaic of cultures, while stressing equality, is an official national policy of our country. This helps create and nurture the needed glue for social cohesiveness.
- Our settlement and integration model is a continuum, designed to address the different needs of the new arrivals, at different stages of their adjustment. For instance;

: the granting of landing immigrant status, which confers all rights short of voting;

: a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, that applies to one and all;

: the ability to apply for Canadian citizenship, in an affordable and transparent manner, after three years of residence, provides a strong legal and social foundation for all new arrivals.

: additionally, there are services and programs delivered in collaboration with civil society at the community level, that provide migrants with employment search assistance; official language training; referrals to health, educational, cultural, housing, recreational needs, and other like-minded services.

However, any successful integration must be a two-way street. There needs to be a reciprocal and balanced accommodation between newcomers and citizens. This means that the former must also live up to their end of the settlement bargain.

Therefore, in return for the rights and privileges they enjoy in Canada, I believe that immigrants must also strive to uphold certain responsibilities towards their adopted land and new fellow citizens. What would some of these obligations be? Well, they should include:

: respecting and embracing the basic values of their new country

: celebrating and adopting elements of their new culture

: being open towards other religions, promoting and practicing the principle of gender equality, and respecting other fellow minorities and citizens.

: refraining from refigting old battles and wars of the homeland, and importing those divisions into their new society

: obtaining citizenship

: participating in the democratic system

: encouraging their children to be as Canadian as maple syrup, without “ghettoizing” their lives and dreams

A balanced accommodation would thus offer newcomers a real stake in the building of the country, and allow them to become full-fledged Canadian citizens, all the while enjoying the full rights and privileges they are entitled to.

Sounds like a win-win formula to me.

### **iii) And finally, we are asked, if votes equal voice?**

The short and honest answer, from my own political experience, is no, not immediately. I found a considerable and natural lag between these two forces; the act of voting and the gaining of a voice.

Don't get me wrong, exercising voting rights offers an individual a democratic choice and expression that is terribly important. But equating this with a “voice”, especially a community voice, that takes time.

More specifically, the period of time is dictated by at least two major factors;

a) One is the pace of the ethnic community's own maturity and mobilization process.

From the general Canadian experience, and from the history of my own Canadian-Italian community, newly and recently arrived immigrants are not exactly in a hurry to involve themselves into the political process and drama of the country. Upon entry, they usually have many more personal and immediate preoccupations and priorities, which consumes most of their energies:

: Building a home for the family.

: Finding and keeping a secure job.

: Facilitating the best possible education for their children.

: Ensuring good healthcare for their family.

: Perhaps starting their own businesses.

: Having the financial means to visit family back in their homeland.

: Sponsoring other family members to join them in Canada.

And so it goes.

In other words, for the new immigrant, there is often a natural timing and sequencing to their integration process. Political engagement and involvement tends to come much later on in the process.

Perhaps, more recent arrivals, given different and greater expectations, have bridged this time gap somewhat. But they too, experience a time lag.

b) And the second factor is the response time of the political institutions to these newer communities.

And again, there is usually a time lag in how quickly political parties and parliaments, react to these new constituencies and the sense of priority, or lack thereof that politicians and officials attach to them.

From my own experience, I saw this at work in my own political party, the Liberal Party of Canada; a centrist party that has governed Canada for much of the country's history.

While great waves of Italian immigrants came to Canada following the Second World War, while a multicultural policy was proclaimed in 1971, and while many Italians at the time were staunch Liberal Party supporters, as of 1983, there was only a single, Liberal MP of Canadian-Italian extraction (Charles Caccia – Toronto) in the entire 282 seat Parliament!

This not only is a reflection of the time lag in terms of community mobilization and interest, but it also reveals a certain political reality. The Party exercised a rather exclusive control of power --- exclusive, that is, of many Canadians from various ethnic backgrounds, including Canadian-Italians. The same predicament prevailed in the other Parties, as well, and extended to all levels of political activity --- local riding associations, regional party organizations, national party leadership structures, government appointments, and the local selection of candidates standing for federal office.

In the early 80's, I was part of the first concerted efforts by the Canadian-Italian community to penetrate the Liberal Party. The aim was to create a more inclusive political culture and approach, and help shape policies that better reflected the rich diversity of the nation.

Today, the political landscape has been completely transformed. A much more inclusive approach is seen in all parties and at all levels; the political leadership is much more reflective of today's Canada; and in Parliament, after the English and

French Canadians, the greatest number of MPs from a single community, are indeed the Canadian-Italian representatives.

Quite a political sea change to say the least --- but it took time. Time for the migrants, their communities, and the political institutions to come to grips with the political needs and aspirations of the day.

In fact, for many observers and participants, the political pendulum may have swung too far. All political parties have been recently experiencing the ethnic organizational muscle at the community level. These "ethnic

movements” can be quite united and strong, and their “machines” are capable of delivering significant numbers of votes at national and provincial leadership conventions, as well as in local nomination meetings that choose candidates for federal office.

The consternation is over an ethnic “gang up” or “instant” party members; with the allegation being that the masses of “new” members do not know much beyond when the bus will pick them up, who they should vote for, and when the buses will return them home.

I too share this anxiety, despite my political activism some thirty years ago. This is not the kind of “voice” that I had advocated for. The community, party, and country all lose in a “herd-like” democracy; only very few individuals, with narrow vested interests, win. Moreover, a winning candidate and MP cannot afford to be seen or perceived as representing only their ethnic faction.

So, after many years of excluding factions of Canadians from the corridors of political power, the political pendulum may be in need of further recalibration.

I suppose no one ever promised that nation building was ever easy!

### **In Closing**

In closing, a sound process of integration is crucial to a successful migration policy and program.

Naturally, coping with increasing ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, especially in societies with either a history of conflicts between certain groups, or a strong tradition of cultural homogeneity, is not an easy task. Realistically then, a process of integration is a matter of evolution, graduation, moderation, and finally accommodation.

There are many country experiences that stand as a good examples for the global community to emulate; of how people can be given the opportunity of starting their lives anew; and of how people of different backgrounds and origins can get along.

These are far from being perfect examples. Nor are they cases for a one-size-fits-all approach. But I believe these stories resonate, especially in a world that is still struggling to find a way for more people to find a place that they can call home.

As a global village, it is so important that we find ways to learn, borrow, and build from these best practices. In addition, leaders and policy makers must begin to build the global governance that can more effectively address and manage the very global phenomenon of migration. Despite the inherent challenges that this task implies, we simply must come up with a new architecture that is in keeping with the new times we live in.

Enacting migration policies based only on domestic considerations falls far short of what our global village needs today. Furthermore, when we think of the ever deepening forces of globalization; the regional hotspots of unrest and armed conflict; the demographic implications of significant population growth in developing countries; and the potential ravages and displacement caused by climate change --- to name but three challenges awaiting us --- how can thinking and acting locally possibly address the global dilemmas of our tomorrows?.

If we did this, nations would draw greater strength from the positive and dynamic faces of migration. In sharing a global approach, national burdens and anxieties will lessen. In projecting a different approach, the rigid and darker ideologies that often grip our migration debate, might actually give way a bit.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says:

“ Better to light a candle, than to curse the darkness.”

I remain hopeful, that if we open our minds and our hearts, we will open an era where migration and nation-building will be accomplished in a more enlightened fashion.

Thank you.

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