

Canada Abroad on July 1

By Don DeVoretz and Yuen Pau Woo

On July 1, Governor General Michaëlle Jean will celebrate Canada Day not in Ottawa, but in Shanghai. Since the Queen will be in the country, her "representative" has the rare opportunity to be abroad for our national day. That the Governor General is celebrating Canada Day in China reflects a new reality of Canada's place in the world. She will be with members of the Canadian diaspora at the Shanghai Expo, in a symbolic recognition of the 2.8 million citizens who live abroad.

Even at 8% of the population -- as much as some provinces -- relatively little is known about Canadians abroad. Public policy on Canadian citizens living overseas tends to be done in a piecemeal fashion, often in reaction to events such as the evacuation of Lebanese Canadians in 2006.

Since Canadians abroad are difficult to locate and have been rendered by policy to be unimportant electorally, they are rarely consulted on policies that affect their interests. Many popular notions about our overseas citizens -- on questions of loyalty, taxation, health care and so on -- are based on conjecture and anecdote, rather than on evidence.

Here is the problem: if there is little information abroad how people arrive at these conclusions, we just live with that inconsistency. However, a recent national poll commissioned by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada sheds light on attitudes toward the Canadian diaspora.

When asked about the practice of dual citizenship, a significant majority of Canadians (63%) agreed that it should be continued. Only 13% disagreed strongly with the practice, which has been in place since 1977. Support for dual citizenship was strongest in British Columbia (70%) and lowest in Quebec (53%). There was especially strong support for dual nationality among respondents under the age of 34 and among the more highly educated.

Access to dual citizenship was curtailed in 2009 with the passage Bill C-37, which limits the ability of Canadians born and living abroad to pass on their citizenship rights. Even though the bill was passed by all parties, a debate on its merits continues to simmer. When asked if Canadians born in another country should have the same citizenship rights as Canadians born in Canada, 66% agreed, with only 9% expressing strong disagreement.

Canadians also lean toward universality when it comes to voting. When asked if resident Canadians and Canadians abroad should have the same voting rights, a slight majority (51%) agreed, with 16% strongly disagreeing. This is not a hypothetical question: current law forbids citizens who have lived abroad continuously for five years or more from voting in a federal election (with a few exceptions).

The underlying issue in these questions, and on the broader set of challenges posed by Canada's overseas population, is that of attachment. More than "loyalty" -- which evokes vague and often dubious notions of allegiance -- the concept of attachment covers a range of measurable actions that connect Canadians abroad with Canadian society, and which allows for an understanding of Canadian identity that goes beyond residency in Canada.

In a paper released this week by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, Kenny Zhang identifies a number of ways in which attachment can be expressed. He finds that overseas citizens are active participants in Canadian economic, social and political life, for example through educational pursuits, business ventures, taxes and engaging in other civic activities. There are, however, a number of public policies that discourage overseas citizens from developing a stronger attachment to Canada.

Public policy can play a significant role in influencing the attachment of overseas citizens to Canada. Citizenship and voting rights, taxation policy, consular services and public diplomacy affect Canadians abroad to one degree or another, and help determine the extent to which they see themselves as Canadian.

The current approach to policy formulation on Canadians abroad alternates between crisis management and benign neglect, with little or no coordination among the many departments that have a role to play. Canadians abroad are often seen as a "brain drain" for the country, but it is also possible to conceive of expatriates as overseas assets for Canada, much in way that we have come to appreciate the value of Canadian companies with a global presence.

The challenge is to develop a suite of policies that embrace Canadians abroad and which encourage their attachment to Canada. At the same time, prudent public policy requires a careful assessment of the fiscal, security and diplomatic risks posed by a large overseas population.

A concerted effort to understand the opportunities and challenges presented by Canadians abroad, and a coordinated approach to policy formulation, could turn this underutilized asset into a formidable advantage for Canada.

When asked if there should be a central agency to coordinate policy issues affecting Canadians abroad, a whopping 73% agreed. And why not, considering that 2.8 million citizens are affected?

Don DeVoretz is Research Director of the Canadians Abroad Project and Yuen Pau Woo is President and CEO of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada.

An edited version of this article appeared in The Vancouver Sun on June 29, 2010.