

Curtis Barlow address to Alberta Social Studies Teachers' Summer Institute, Edmonton, Alberta

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First of all, I would like to say that the principles and objectives of the Alberta social studies program from kindergarden to grade 12, match almost precisely those of the ICC.

The program documents are exceptionally well-written. Whoever wrote them is to be commended for their clarity and eloquence.

In a nutshell, the ICC strives to provide opportunities for new citizens to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge that will enable them to become engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens.

And by engaging the participation of all citizens in this work, we hope to foster the building of a society that is pluralistic, bilingual, multicultural, inclusive and democratic.

If this sounds familiar to you, it should. It is a direct paraphrase of the Alberta social studies curriculum program materials.

The institute for Canadian citizenship in was founded by the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson in 2005 as her legacy project at the conclusion of her mandate as Canada's 26th governor general.

Governors general are given the opportunity by government to continue working in a field that has characterized their mandate, as their legacy.

Mme. Clarkson chose immigration with a focus on citizenship because she knows that our immigration policies are unique and highly admired and emulated by countries around the world,

She believes that the transformation of our society as a result thereof is the single most important issue confronting our nation and its future.

And citizenship embraces, includes and transcends virtually all issues.

What I mean by "unique" is that in Canada, all legal immigrants are offered the promise of full citizenship three years down the road.

In other words, we choose our immigrants as future citizens.

This is part of the essence of being Canadian – taking an open and outward view of the world and welcoming the world into our country.

This extraordinary flow of people reshapes and revitalizes our country but it wouldn't work if we did not take citizenship seriously.

75% of Canadians believe that immigrants have a positive influence on the country.

This compares with only 54% of Australians and 57% of Americans.

85% of Canadians say that multiculturalism is important to Canada and Canadian society.

In fact, our identity as Canadians is, in many ways, diversity.

The Alberta social studies program both recognizes this fact and reinforces it.

The program emphasizes the importance of diversity and respect for differences as well as the need for social cohesion and the effective functioning of society.

A key component of effective social organizations, communities and institutions is recognition of diversity of experiences and perspectives.

Individuals need to feel that their identities are viewed as legitimate before they can contribute to the public good and feel a sense of belonging and empowerment as citizens.

The program of studies emphasizes how diversity and differences are assets that enrich our lives.

Students will have opportunities to value diversity, to recognize differences as positive attributes, and to recognize the evolving nature of individual identities.

Through the interactions of place and historical processes of change, diversity has been an important asset in the evolution of Canadian society.

Accommodation of diversity is essential for fostering social cohesion in a pluralistic society.

At the ICC, what do we mean by "citizenship"?

Citizenship, in legal terms means;

- The right to apply for (and carry) a Canadian passport;
- The right to vote;
- The right to leave, or live and work anywhere in Canada;
- The right to apply for jobs with the federal government.

There is also the responsibility to respect our laws and arguably, the responsibility to vote.

But we at the ICC take a larger and more expansive view of citizenship and of what makes a good citizen.

Again, much of what we believe is reflected in the Alberta social studies program materials.

For example, we believe that with an empowered citizenry comes personal and collective responsibility for the public good.

But how do we get there?

Objectives of the institute:

First of all, to enable new citizens to become more informed about Canada – its history, its culture, its traditions, its system of government, its laws – more engaged in Canadian society, and more committed to staying in Canada and to giving back to the country and to the communities in which they work and live.

We applaud the social studies approach to historical thinking as a process whereby students are challenged to rethink assumptions about the past and to re-imagine both the present and the future.

Historical thinking therefore allows students and citizens to develop a sense of time and place to help define their identities.

Historical thinking develops citizens willing to engage in a pluralistic democracy and to promote and support democratic institutions.

On the cultural front, your program uses speaking, writing and representing to relate a community's stories and to convey knowledge, beliefs, values and traditions through narrative history, music, art and literature.

Politically, students will explore how democratic principles and ideals are reflected in the structure and functions of their local and provincial governments.

Students will analyze the relationship between Canada's political and legislative processes and their impact on issues pertaining to governance, rights, citizenship and identity.

How do legislative processes attempt to address emerging issues of immigration and how are changes to these policies a reflection of world issues?

What impact does increasing immigration have on aboriginal peoples and communities?

This is all information that should be taught to new citizens in order to make them the empowered people we want them to be.

We want our citizens to address these matters too.

Adrienne Clarkson often says that citizenship is not a buffet table of rights and responsibilities from which you can pick and choose at will.

You have to take it all on – the good with the bad of our history, our traditions, our laws, our systems.

As a citizen, they now belong to you.

But by committing oneself to Canada through the acquisition of citizenship, we at the ICC do not believe that new citizens have to give up all that they brought with them as newcomers – their own language, their own culture, their traditions, their beliefs, their experiences of life, their achievements, their professional credentials...

These should not be forgotten, but should be added to and expanded by all that you take on when you become Canadian citizens.

Together, all this could make for a unique and very rich cultural mix.

To paraphrase the social studies curriculum documents,

Central to citizenship is the recognition of the diversity of experiences and perspectives and the pluralistic nature of Canadian society.

A pluralistic view recognizes that citizenship and identity are shaped by multiple factors – culture, language, environment, gender, ideology, religion, spirituality and philosophy.

Individuals need to feel that their identities are viewed as legitimate before they can contribute to the public good and feel a sense of belonging and empowerment as citizens.

Identity and self-esteem are shaped by multiple personal, social, linguistic and cultural factors

And we have much to learn from our new citizens.

We must be open to hearing their voices and allowing those voices to be raised.

What good citizens must have is a sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging engenders in new citizens pride in one's country, loyalty to that country and commitment to that country – the commitment to stay and to contribute.

The lack of a feeling of belonging in and to Canada by new citizens is a serious obstacle to integrating new citizens into our society.

Consider the facts:

Right now we accept about 265,000 new immigrants to Canada every year.

85% of new immigrants do go on to become full citizens.

And 84% of new Canadians say that the quality of life is better in Canada than where they came from.

We still enjoy a positive reputation internationally for the effectiveness with which we are able to integrate newcomers into our society.

However, we at the institute want to make it better.

Thus our second objective is to stimulate a national conversation on these issues and to elevate awareness across Canada in the minds of the larger community of established Canadians of their need and of their responsibility to participate actively in the integration process.

The ICC programs are geared toward providing opportunities for new citizens to have meaningful contact with community leaders and the larger community of established Canadians; to bridge the gap between new and established Canadians.

For example,

I. ICC-designed enhanced community citizenship ceremonies

These ceremonies are organized by voluntary committees across the country and include a one-hour roundtable discussion between new citizens and community leaders, such as members of the order of Canada, recipients of the caring Canadian award, veterans, and the like.

We currently have about 22 such committees established across Canada, and are creating more.

ii. Cultural access pass program

A pilot project launched in April in Toronto with six participating museums – the AGO, the ROM, the McMichael, the Textile, Gardiner, Ontario Science Centre, all of whom are offering free family passes to new citizen families for a year after they are sworn in.

This enables new citizens to:

Become familiar with Canadian culture and cultural institutions;

Develop a sense of belonging to their local communities.

The institutions get to expand their market and audience base.

We want to make this program national, with your help and participation.

In conclusion, as I have said, the exchange of knowledge is a two-way street.

We have much to learn from our new citizens.

We must create an open, welcoming and willing environment that will allow that two-way flow of knowledge to occur.

The Alberta social studies program is an important component of that process.

For the program has at its heart the concepts of citizenship and identity in the Canadian context.

It promotes a sense of belonging and acceptance in students as they engage in active and responsible citizenship at the local, community, provincial, national and global level.

Social studies develops the key values and attitudes, knowledge and understanding, and skills and processes necessary for students to become active and responsible citizens, engaged in the democratic process and aware of their capacity to effect change in their communities, society and the world.

Social studies provides learning opportunities to understand the challenges and opportunities that immigration presents to newcomers and to Canada

And

To understand how social cohesion can be achieved in a pluralistic society.

And I say amen to that.