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THE CRIC PAPERS

Finding Their Voice:

Civic Engagement
Among Aboriginal
and New Canadians



Centre for Research and
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Introduction

The Canadian Unity Council (CUC) and its research and communications program, the Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC), are committed to engaging Canadians in the building and strengthening of their country. Through CUC's citizen participation activities and CRIC's research on the views, values and concerns of Canadians, we reach out to people of all backgrounds and ages, helping them to understand how the country works and allowing them to suggest ways to making it work better.

Our interest in civic engagement has led to specific research on youth. In December 2004, CRIC published *CRIC Paper #15, Canadian Democracy: Bringing Youth Back Into the Political Process* (available at www.cric.ca). It brought together much of the current work on youth civic engagement, including a report on studies that CRIC had conducted with young leaders in Ontario and in New Brunswick. These studies provided insight into the views and attitudes of young Canadians towards politics, public service, leadership, and community. They also produced interesting preliminary findings about the civic engagement of young new Canadians and young Aboriginal Canadians.

Why is it important to have a greater understanding of how Aboriginal Canadians and New Canadians engage in civic life and what their values are? Given current demographic trends, these groups are and will continue to be increasingly important players in the way Canada is growing and changing. During the 1990s, more immigrants came to Canada than in any previous decade. According to Statistics Canada, 18% of Canada's population is foreign-born. On a per capita basis, Canada's yearly intake of immigrants is higher than that of either Australia or the United States. In 2001, 1.8 million people, or 6.2% of our country's population, were immigrants who arrived during the previous decade.

The Aboriginal population is also experiencing very strong growth. In Canada, 3.8% of the population now identify themselves as Aboriginal. Furthermore, in 2001, almost half of the Aboriginal population lived in urban areas (mostly Prairie cities). Finally, one of every three Aboriginal Canadians is under the age of 14. This emerging generation is particularly prominent in Manitoba and Saskatchewan where one of every four children is Aboriginal.

Encouraging the next generation of Canadians to take on leadership roles in this country is a challenge for decision-makers who eventually must "pass the torch". However, the special experiences and values of Aboriginal and new Canadians mean that different methods of engagement must be found. As the faces of our leaders change, they will reflect the growing presence of new and Aboriginal Canadians. Canada's ability to encourage Canadians of increasingly varied backgrounds to take an active role in shaping civil society will be a determining factor in the country's future success.

The Civic Engagement of Young New and Aboriginal Canadians

By Gina Bishop and Sally Preiner

Studies of democratic reform in Canada have provided a major opportunity to examine the citizen's role in the modern Canadian state, and to explore citizen engagement. But if a country is running relatively smoothly, without portents of major social or economic upheaval, why should the level of civic engagement among citizens be of such concern?

It matters because a population's level of civic engagement is often associated with the quality of its democratic system. Some research suggests that participation in civic activities is declining in Canada and in the United States, yet there is also evidence that youth are withdrawing from community participation less quickly than from formal political participation. A study of college students in the USA, conducted in 2000 by the Harvard University Institute of Politics, found that while formal political involvement was low, volunteerism in the community was high, and that "youngsters were seeking new ways to solve local and national problems."¹

Thus, it would be simplistic to say that young people are pulling away from traditional politics because they are apathetic or uncaring about their communities and the people in them. Rather, in order to develop the tools for encouraging higher civic engagement and participation, researchers, politicians, community leaders and public servants must know more about the attitudes of younger Canadians to formal and informal political activity. They also must better understand the values of young people regarding community and public service. CRIC's research seeks to increase the level of knowledge in these areas.

CRIC'S RESEARCH ON YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN CANADA

During the past few years, CRIC has examined the attitudes and values of young leaders towards the political process to gain insight into factors affecting their political participation. To date, CRIC's research on these issues has focused on young leaders, adults in their 20s and 30s who are active in their milieus. The first phase was conducted in Ontario in 2003, the second in New Brunswick in 2004.² The outcomes of these two phases suggest that we are not seeing a retreat from community leadership by younger Canadians, but instead that there is a shift in terms of priorities and leadership style.

CRIC's 2003 study of young leaders in Ontario found that first- or second-generation Canadians were much more likely to be aware of, and interested in, politics and government than those whose families had resided in Canada longer. Of the few focus group participants interested in government or political work, most were first- or second-generation Canadians. These young leaders stood out from the other participants because they were more likely to report that they discuss politics, government or current news with family and friends.³ At the same time, young first- or second-generation Canadians were no more positive or negative about government and politics than their counterparts.

In CRIC's 2004 research project on young leaders in New Brunswick, Aboriginal participants were clearly different from other New Brunswick young leaders. Young Aboriginal Canadians were more likely to be interested in politics at the community-based level. They were also more highly aware of their local government and politicians, and better able to see the relationship between government, politics and their everyday lives. Finally, they

1 Schugurensky, Daniel, "Civic Participation: On Active Citizenship, Social Capital and Public Policy" in *Canadian Diversity: Citizenship – Values and Responsibilities*, Volume 2:1, Spring 2003, pg. 10.

2 See www.cric.ca for more information on this previous research.

3 Unfortunately, further conclusions are difficult to reach at this point, given that during the execution of this first project in 2003, priority was not given to exploring these differences in a more systematic way. However, in the subsequent research project focusing on young leaders in New Brunswick, CRIC was better prepared to capture and explore differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, within the scope of the larger project.

The Civic Engagement of Young New and Aboriginal Canadians

were also more likely to feel ownership and responsibility in terms of their community. Also, some Aboriginal participants were already working in their communities with current political leaders. David Newhouse notes how young Aboriginal Canadians have had very different cultural and political experiences from those of their parents:

“During the last decade, Aboriginal students have become more confident, more grounded in the traditions of their culture, and may even speak an Aboriginal language. More and more are from large urban Aboriginal communities. This is the generation that has grown up in the shadow of the Pow Wow circuit, cultural renewal, and who have begun to experience certain aspects of self-government. Aboriginal students want to maintain their differences and want these differences to be recognized and respected.”⁴

THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG NEW CANADIANS AND YOUNG ABORIGINAL CANADIANS

CRIC recently conducted a third phase of this research – a national qualitative research project in the spring of 2005 to better understand the values and attitudes of young Aboriginal Canadians and young new Canadians. Previous research had identified these two groups as being more engaged and politically aware than other young Canadians. Phase three explored the particular values and attitudes of these two groups in greater detail, focusing on the values, priorities and motivations of both young new Canadians and young Aboriginal Canadians (aged 18 to 30 years) with respect to how the public sector, public institutions, and the ethic of public service fit into their aspirations and ambitions. In total, twenty focus groups were conducted with participants who are involved in their communities and who self-identified as leaders in school, work, or community activities. Ten groups were conducted with new Canadian young adults and ten with Aboriginal young adults. One hundred and twenty people participated – fifty-seven new Canadian young adults and sixty-three Aboriginal young adults.

The following tables outline the locations, dates, and number of participants for each group, each of which had 6-8 participants.

LOCATION OF GROUPS – NEW CANADIAN YOUNG ADULTS

LOCATION	DATE
Toronto	April 7, 2005
Toronto	April 7, 2005
Halifax	April 11, 2005
Halifax	April 11, 2005
Montreal (French)	April 11, 2005
Montreal (French)	April 11, 2005
Vancouver	April 20, 2005
Vancouver	April 20, 2005
Edmonton	April 26, 2005
Edmonton	April 26, 2005

LOCATION OF GROUPS – ABORIGINAL CANADIAN YOUNG ADULTS

LOCATION	DATE
Fredericton	April 12, 2005
Fredericton	April 12, 2005
Orillia	April 14, 2005
Orillia	April 14, 2005
Lethbridge	April 19, 2005
Lethbridge	April 19, 2005
Vancouver	April 21, 2005
Vancouver	April 21, 2005
Regina	April 27, 2005
Regina	April 27, 2005

⁴ Newhouse, David, “All Singing, All Dancing, 24/7”, in *CRIC Paper #14 Facing the Future: Relations Between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Canadians*, June 2004, pg. 11. Available at www.cric.ca

The Civic Engagement of Young New and Aboriginal Canadians

Participants were recruited based on age, ethnic background (new Canadians or Aboriginal Canadians), and community involvement and leadership orientation.⁵ Each group was recruited so as to provide as good a mix as possible in terms of age, marital status and family composition, income, education, and occupational status. The length of the group discussions was approximately two hours.

Phase three of our research on young leaders builds on some of the findings identified in earlier phases, and uncovers more of the particular nuances in the values and attitudes of young New Canadians and young Aboriginal Canadians. Some of the most important findings are as follows:

1. AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT IN CIVIC LIFE

While initial interest in, and awareness of, current events and politics may not always be high for most young Canadians, it takes little discussion to bring them to the forefront. Interestingly, this interest and knowledge was often closer to the surface among young new Canadian and young Aboriginal Canadian participants than among average young leaders in the CRIC research conducted in Ontario in 2003 and in New Brunswick in 2004.

While CRIC's earlier research had found a knowledge deficit about the workings of government and politics, when put into groups of two and given five minutes to come up with a definition of democracy, most participants in the phase three focus groups were able to identify at least some aspects of the democratic system. Young new Canadians, in particular, were slightly more at ease with this exercise than were young Aboriginal Canadians or other young Canadians. Among young new Canadians almost all identified voting – and being informed in order to be able to vote responsibly – as one of the most important responsibilities of a citizen.

"I vote because I hear people bitching: Oh politics this and politics that. They are exploiting us, and this and that. So that is why you have to vote. If you don't vote you don't have a voice, so you should not complain about politics. So even if I vote for a tiny little party who will never win, still I have voted, and that is how you change things in a way." (Young new Canadian, male, Montreal, 2005)

The few not inclined to vote felt that voting offered no possibility of change, or that regardless of what government was elected, their own interests would not be seriously affected.

For those new young Canadians who expressed no interest in politics, it was, however, clear that many at least had some interest in current affairs, broad social issues or world events.

"I'm interested in current affairs, to know what's going on, to be informed. To know what's going on around me, how it will affect me, or how it will affect other interests that I have." (Young new Canadian, female, Edmonton, 2005)

Young Aboriginal participants generally were far more interested in current affairs and politics that had an impact on First Nations communities than in provincial, national or global news and politics. Many said that they only followed political issues on their own reserve, or those that had direct implications for them.

⁵ Potential participants were randomly contacted by phone, and screened for criteria such as being active in activities outside the home or work in their community, having been recognized, or won a prize for community service, leadership, mentoring, or similar in their community, at school or work, or having been elected to student councils or served on the board of an organization. They were also selected based on whether they said their peers identified them as a leader or a team player, and based on their responses to a series of questions that tested for such characteristics as ability to take risks, decision-making capabilities, and interest in the way society is developing.

2. CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIETY

There was no evidence that respondents did not care about their communities or the world, or that they are selfish, unduly cynical, or have no thoughts about what they would like to see in terms of positive change. Young Canadians are not less interested in leading and in contributing to their communities than were previous generations. The main difference is that they generally prefer to make their contributions outside of traditional institutions, such as political parties, the electoral system, the public service, and churches.

The concept of “volunteering” is generally perceived as daunting – something that requires a major, long-term commitment. When trying to volunteer in an official way, youth often say it is difficult to know where to start, or that organizations try to impose a specific schedule of involvement, which makes it difficult for them to make a commitment. Also, having to move through a hierarchy – working their way “up” in a volunteer organization – is negatively perceived.

Indeed, informal community involvement and activity is very much a part of the daily lives of many young new Canadians and young Aboriginal Canadians who participated in the 2005 focus groups, although they did not always identify this as community involvement or volunteerism. Most young Aboriginal Canadians felt that it was important for them to give back to their communities. When young Aboriginal participants spoke of their social activities, many mentioned formal and informal volunteering, and participation in Aboriginal cultural or political activities as either current or former aspects of their lives. Some said that giving and sharing was an essential part of their culture.

“I was a youth supervisor at the youth centre and I was not only the supervisor but also the youth counsellor, but I wasn’t being paid. There wasn’t any name for counselling, for what I was doing, but there would be these people at 11 or midnight, when I’m just about to close the youth centre, somebody would come and say they needed somebody to talk to for a bit, or they would call me to see if anybody was there, somebody would just want to chat.” (Young Aboriginal Canadian, female, Vancouver, 2005)

CRIC’s latest research found that many young new Canadians chose to help other new Canadians through volunteering or through their own work. Participants engaged in politics and volunteerism also tended to be involved in multigenerational activities within their communities, and wanted to pass their cultural traditions on to their children. Young new Canadian participants in Montreal were slightly more consciously involved in volunteer or community activities, particularly those with an explicitly political overtone, than were participants in other regions.

3. VIEWS ON POLITICS

Some participants were critical of Canada’s current political leadership, especially those in Fredericton and Vancouver. Many share the view that politicians are mostly from established and usually wealthy families who do not reflect Canada’s diversity. Some believed that business leaders and the wealthy have too much influence on political discourse and decision-making. Others commented on the perceived dishonesty of politicians, particularly those at higher levels of government.

“I am disgusted with politics... There is always something. It is always a power trip, trying to ridicule the other guy, people trying to just fight each other off. I don’t really think they want things to advance.” (Young new Canadian, male, Montreal, 2005)

Many young Canadians seem to believe that corruption is to be expected with most governments. Even though the 2005 focus groups were being held during the same time as the Gomery Commission hearings, it did not appear that it provoked any major changes in how young Canadians perceived governments in general.

Some Aboriginal participants were equally critical of current Aboriginal leadership, seeing it as corrupt and rife with cronyism and greed.

"I don't want to run the risk of saying the wrong thing about the wrong person and being blacklisted and they won't help my family out because I said something about the wrong person. You can be blacklisted really bad in reserves if you open your mouth up and say anything."
(Young Aboriginal Canadian, female, Fredericton, 2005)

Results from these focus groups need to be understood, however, against the background of CRIC's survey data which shows that levels of cynicism towards elected officials and government are no higher among younger Canadians than among the general population.

4. MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Regardless of their views on governments and politics, most young Aboriginal and young new Canadians feel that they can and must try to make a difference in their own community. Among young new Canadians in particular, many, even if they were not particularly interested in politics or current affairs, found something at some level that they cared about. While they might not see themselves as activists, they were prepared to take action on the issues that were most important to them.

"I do Christmas gift wrapping for the BC Cancer Agency, and I actually started doing that because my aunt was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I thought, 'Maybe I can do something.' It was just a feeling of helplessness, and it kind of gave me a sense of 'at least I'm doing something.'"
(Young new Canadian, female, Vancouver, 2005)

Among young Aboriginal Canadians currently studying off reserve, many wanted to bring skills back to the reserve to help their people. They were passionate about improving their life and the lives of people in their communities, and providing opportunities, a strong home, and a strong cultural base not only for their own children, but for all Aboriginal youth.

Most young Aboriginal Canadian participants could see themselves in the future working mainly within their own communities, or within the larger Aboriginal community in Canada. Most of those with an interest in politics were more interested in band politics. Some were interested in off-reserve politics – at the provincial or federal level as a way to take action for the benefit of their communities.

"I think my interest is more with First Nation's issues. Of course, we're going to say as First Nation's people, they're directly going to affect me, but also I feel that I have a responsibility to try to educate myself and others around me. We've got the whole population of Canada fighting for Canadian politics right?" (Young Aboriginal Canadian, male, Vancouver, 2005)

5. OBSTACLES TO PARTICIPATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Like most other young Canadians, young new Canadians saw life as a series of steps: training or education; entering into a committed relationship; property ownership; and, finally, starting a family. The demands of completing these steps are seen as the biggest obstacles to greater participation in the public sphere.

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“If you have a mortgage; you have a car; you have your bills; you’re trying so hard to keep your head above water....I really couldn’t care about the election, because I care about keeping myself out of debt and putting food on the table. So in that sense, I think that has to be taken into account.”
(Young new Canadian, male, Edmonton, 2005)

In our discussions with young new Canadians and young Aboriginal Canadians, three of the main reasons given for holding off on involvement—time, money and knowledge—time was the least likely to be seen as insurmountable. Some expected that they would become more involved with community activities in the future, often as an outgrowth of work or hobbies, or in connection with their children’s needs.

Like other young Canadians, many young new Canadians and young Aboriginal Canadians feel they are “outsiders” to government and politics. While many think it is important to have some knowledge of current affairs, some feel out of their depth when they don’t understand the news that they hear.

Among Aboriginal youth, the loss of cultural tradition and language has taken its toll on how they see their place in history. Some see themselves as a “lost generation”, trying to preserve and rebuild their culture. They do this by gleaning what they can from elders to pass on to their children, while seeing themselves as too busy to assume leadership themselves. That these young Canadians do not associate their role of preserving and rebuilding their culture as a form of leadership is an interesting insight into their view of the world and their role in it.

The question of identity was also a topic of discussion among young new Canadians in Quebec. While most participants were very vocal about their sense of identity as both Quebecer and as Canadian, many feel that Canadian-born Quebecers do not always view them as being “real” Quebecers.

They were frustrated over the politicization of the words Canadian and Québécois—young new Canadians in this province identify with both, while many of those around them thought that the choice has to be made as to which identity takes precedence over the other.

“A lot of people are saying I am Québécois and I am not Canadian. Personally I don’t agree with that. We are living in Canada. We are also Canadians. People in Québec want to separate for a given reason that I don’t understand, and I will never understand it. Québec is a wonderful place to live as a partnership with Canada, and I love living in French.” (Young new Canadian, male, Montreal, 2005)

6. YOUNG ABORIGINALS AND GOVERNANCE

Most Aboriginal young adults participating in this study admit that they know very little about how the Canadian Government works. Many express frustration with the federal government, and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, yet at the same time, most of them easily and willingly express their pride in being Canadian. They feel that Canada is a country that is more diverse and less “prejudiced” in its treatment of people than some other countries. This does not change their concern, however, about what needs to be done to help Canadian Aboriginal individuals and communities.

Some participants referred to the consensus model of governance that exists in some communities, where all citizens come to meetings to discuss every issue that requires a decision from Chief and Council. Debate among the community on the merits of each issue is important, and the discussion itself is the key as it gives the Chief and Council the information that they need to make a decision. Once all have had their say, the community lets the Chief and Council decide on what is to be done.

In terms of electing Chief and Council, many feel that it doesn't really matter if there is a vote or not. In many communities the "job of Chief and Council" is held by members of a select few families. Some felt that a simple rotation between these clans would be easier and more appropriate; yet nothing was said about how others in the community might also be equipped with the skills to run for office. This leads some to the view that elections are meaningless. In other communities it was felt that once Chief and Council were elected no more influence could be exerted until the subsequent election. At that point, if you don't like the work of Chief and Council, you can "boot them off" and try somebody else.

Some young Aboriginals expressed major concerns about the form that government is taking in their communities, and that corruption can occur too easily in their local governments.

"One thing that the politicians around here have that we don't have on the community is accountability. If they mess up, they get caught, they get charged, but where I'm from it's not like that. You mess up, you know, you may lose one or two votes but there are no repercussions to it, you know?" (Young Aboriginal Canadian, male, Fredericton, 2005)

CONCLUSION

Throughout all of CRIC's research, we have heard, time and again, that young Canadians are not apathetic—but feel that they do not have a proper understanding of how government works. There is a sense that even if they did understand the process and the players involved, those in power would not take their views seriously. Clearly, many participants do not see the current system as one that is responsive to their needs. Young Aboriginal Canadians and young new Canadians, in particular, face the added challenge of not seeing their communities properly represented at higher levels of government decision-making, thereby making them feel more like "outsiders" to, rather than stakeholders in government. These groups need an innovative gateway into the established network.

Given these findings, the biggest challenges faced by decision-makers are not how to generate interest among young Canadians in community service, or how to combat unusually high levels of cynicism within this demographic, but rather how to help young Canadians develop a better understanding of how government works, and to give appropriate recognition to young Canadians for the contributions as involved citizens that they are making every day.

These are starting points for helping young Canadian adults recognize that being an involved citizen is the responsibility of all who live in a democracy. At the same time, it is vital to find gateways that will provide access to established networks as well as create opportunities for the establishment of new networks.

Convincing young Canadian adults that their commitment is wanted and needed—during and between elections—is key. Canadian democracy is strengthened through better understanding of the values and attitudes of younger Canadians better, and by involving them in the discussion of the policy directions that affect how the country's future is shaped.

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Degree and Kind: Civic Engagement and Aboriginal Canadians

By Martin Whittles

If, as William Reuben, the Civil Society Coordinator of the World Bank's Social Development Department notes, "civic engagement is the participation of private actors in the public sphere, conducted through direct and indirect interactions of civil society organizations and citizens-at-large with government, multilateral institutions and business establishments to influence decision making or pursue common goals" and that a "citizen's active involvement in designing, implementing and monitoring economic and political reforms has never been as possible as it is today"⁶, then the example of Aboriginal civic engagement in Canada merits closer inspection.

PEACE, ORDER, AND GOOD GOVERNMENT

Canada has always been a tapestry of class, gender, and ethnic categories, a fabric of distinctive peoples who enjoy varying degrees of access to social and cultural capital, different experiences with Canada's legal and political systems, and often-distinctive assumptions about public decision-making. Divisions of power, privilege, and prestige maintain a uniquely Canadian version of hegemony that allows the privileged to maintain economic and political dominance. Education, media, and religion further sustain this, imposing the elites' attitudes, values, and worldviews, thereby extending their influence throughout Canadian society. And, despite centuries of immigration and internal transformation, no single group has had as acute and chronic an experience of hegemony as the original peoples.

For almost five centuries, Native peoples were perceived as constitutional wards in need of custodial supervision and administered as such. They were alternatively stigmatised by, and alienated from, a political apparatus seemingly both circumspect and uncaring. Successive colonial and mercantile regimes addressed Native nations

as infantile, undeveloped, and incomplete civilisations, and as variously corrupt, savage, and fallen societies. When Aboriginal people did encounter the nation-state in what became Canada—at the trading post, the treaty table, or the residential school chalkboard—they found themselves estranged from it.

To this day, it could be argued that many Aboriginal Canadians harbour attitudes that include negativity, cynicism, and detachment towards local, regional, and national issues that they typically perceive as essentially non-Aboriginal in process, focus, and result. However, for many, politics in the dominant society is perceived as a clumsy and bewildering process, deficient and uncertain in its apparent motivation, and vague, perhaps even irrelevant in outcome and application. Why, after all, should the direct descendants of those directly imperilled by the 1857 *Gradual Civilisation Act* that pronounced Native people wards of government, denying them the federal vote and the right to purchase or consume alcohol, only to be replaced less than a decade later by the *Indian Act* that, among other things, banned, under pain of confiscation and imprisonment, the Potlatch and the Sun Dance, view colonialism's legacy with anything but suspicion? Even well into the 20th century, Aboriginal people remained exiled from civic participation in the dominant society. Any remaining suspicions to the contrary can be dispatched quickly when one considers that as late as 1927 "the *Indian Act* was amended so Indians had to obtain permission from the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs to solicit funds to pursue legal claims seeking redress of treaty breaches... [a measure]... not repealed until 1951".⁷ The Potlatch and Sun Dance remained enforceable breaches of the *Indian Act* until mid-century, leaving many Aboriginal Canadians feeling uncertain and unwelcome citizens.

6 Reuben, William, "Civic Engagement, Social Accountability, and Governance Crisis". <http://www.worldbank.org/participation/civicingagement/civicingagementsocialaccountabilitygovernancecrisis.pdf>

7 Te Matahauriki Research Institute, "Constitutional Provisions for Pluralism, Biculturalism, and Multiculturalism in Canada and New Zealand: Perspectives From the Québécois, First Nations, and Maori". <http://lianz.waikato.ac.nz/PAPERS/Rob/CanNZ.frameworks.pdf>

If Aboriginal Canadians were dissuaded from civic engagement at the level of the courts until the last half-century, securing the franchise was equally wearying: Status Indian males on active military service in the First World War were the first to be extended the vote. Aboriginal servicemen were granted temporary franchise in 1917, a privilege returned to them in 1920, and again, extended temporarily to Native World War Two combatants in 1944. Six years later, the right to vote federally was extended to former Status Indians who had waived elements of their Indian Act status – the same year the vote was extended to the Inuit. An unconditional federal franchise finally was extended to all Status Indians in 1960. Provincial voting rights were granted gradually, starting with British Columbia in 1949 and ending with Quebec, two decades later.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ABORIGINAL CANADA: PAST STRUCTURES

Traditionally, in many Aboriginal societies, prior to contact with Europeans, and most especially among smaller and nomadic groups, there existed varying cultures of equality in which individuals – regardless of age, status, or sex – routinely exercised choice over a wide range of issues as autonomous political actors. Decision-making was often a leaderless process involving the entire community in a search for consensus through public participation by all. No one person held sway; dissenter's positions were heard. Leadership often was vested in communally recognised authority, frequently elders. They would ensure that the consensus was respected. When the exercise of blunt, coercive power was needed, it usually was conferred on those with special skills or knowledge to deal with a specific situation within a given time frame.

With contact, and later Confederation, traditional decision-making was usurped and supplanted by treaty and legal fiat through a centralised, remote, and anonymous process. Traditional leadership was replaced by government decree with an enforced rule by tribal notables artificially elevated to levels of authority not previously seen. Later, the imposition of non-Aboriginal Indian Agents eroded local engagement, and, later still, the imposition of Westminster-style elected band councils and chiefs further muddied the civic process in many reserve and remote communities.

To that end, voter turnout statistics from the last decade or two clearly support the claim that Aboriginal civic engagement is declining by degree. Recent voter turnout rates in communities identified as Aboriginal or predominantly Aboriginal reveal a certain disengagement. At 48%, Aboriginal voter turnout in the 2000 general election was 16% lower than for the non-Aboriginal population. In 1997, Aboriginal voter turnout was 40%, 38% in 1993.⁸

Aboriginal people constitute less than four percent of the Canadian population, a figure that dissuades many from greater civic engagement. Most Inuit, Metis, and First Nations people are scattered widely throughout the country, further diluting any sense of electoral clout. In 2001 Aboriginals represented an electoral majority in only three of 301 federal ridings and constituted sizable minorities (greater than 20% of the electorate) in seven additional ridings.⁹ Without question, Aboriginal voters experience civic exclusion and “a perceived lack of effectiveness...and the virtual lack of a group's presence in electoral politics” as they recognise “themselves as distinct from other Canadians and as belonging to ‘nations within’ and as nations that are not represented within”.¹⁰ Although in 1873 Louis Riel was the first Aboriginal Canadian elected to Parliament, the June 2004 general election

8 Guerin, Daniel, “Aboriginal Participation in Canadian Federal Elections: Trends and Implications”, *Electoral Insight*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2003, p. 11-12.

9 Aboriginal People and the Federal Electoral Process: Participation Trends and Elections Canada's Initiatives (January 2004). <http://www.elections.ca/content.asp?section=loi&document=abor&lang=e&textonly=false>

10 Ladner, Kiera, “The Alienation of Nation: Understanding Aboriginal Electoral Participation”, *Electoral Insight*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (November 2003), p. 22.

returned only four Aboriginal MPs: two Inuit; one Metis; and one from the First Nations. Finally, more than half the Aboriginal people in Canada are aged 24 years or younger (compared to 31% of non-Aboriginals) – an age cohort that historically has produced less-than-average voter turnouts. In New Brunswick, Aboriginal voter turnout for federal elections dropped from a high of 70% in the 1960s to less than 18% by the late 1980s, and from 64% to 27% provincially during the same period.

Yet, to assume that Aboriginal Canadians have been systematically disengaging from the electoral system *en masse* is misleading. In territorial elections in the Canadian North, due to problems in enumeration, voter turnout can often exceed the number of registered voters in any riding. In Cambridge Bay on the Arctic Ocean, where the current MLA is also Nunavut's Minister of Finance, voter turnout was 95.15% in 1991, 85.02% in 1995, and 115.07% in 1999. In Baker Lake, the only inland community in Nunavut, turnout rates were 85.77%, 90.08%, and 103.0% respectively, while in Arviat on Hudson's Bay, home to the Speaker of the Assembly, the respective numbers were 85.77%, 90.08%, and 92.68%. Over 77% of the eligible voters among the Cree in the James Bay region voted in the 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum.¹¹ Returning to New Brunswick for a moment, voter turnout for band elections increased in the 20 years following 1972 from 82% to 95%, indicating a greater interest in local politics and local issues.¹²

During the 2004 general election campaign, the Assembly of First Nations explored ways to engage voters, including releasing outlines of the Aboriginal platforms of federal political parties. During the campaign National Grand Chief Phil Fontaine took the stage holding a t-shirt with the phrase "I'm Indian and I vote" and was quoted as

saying, "We have a real opportunity here, but we won't be able to take advantage of that opportunity unless we participate."¹³

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ABORIGINAL CANADA: PRESENT OPTIONS AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

A dynamic pluralistic democracy, such as Canada, affords multiple opportunities for civic engagement beyond those of the ballot box and the connections Canadians establish to the public process of decision-making process. Thus, Aboriginal candidacies in municipal, provincial, and federal elections and Aboriginal voter turnout are but two aspects of the civic process. It is worth noting that Aboriginal people have experimented with various approaches to civic engagement – perhaps more than any other identifiable group in the country.

They identify issues that matter to them with increasing frequency, responding in ever more effective ways. Reuben offers us four examples of alternative civic engagement and I say that Aboriginal Canadians are employing each effectively.¹⁴ The first, most assertive, and perhaps the most effective in raising public consciousness over Native issues is the "confrontational model" where government is presented as the principal obstacle to Aboriginal objectives, and is visible in the increased frequency in which Aboriginals have sought recognition and redress through the courts during the past 20 years, to the Native public protest and defiance witnessed at blockades, and most dramatically at the Oka standoff in 1990.

11 Coon Come, Matthew, "Dishonourable Conduct: The Crown in Right of Canada and Quebec, and the James Bay Cree", in David Taras and Beverly Rasporich, *A Passion for Identity: An Introduction to Canadian Studies*, International Thomson Publishing, Scarborough, 1997, p. 94.

12 Bedford, David, "Aboriginal Voter Participation in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick", *Electoral Insight*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (November 2003), p. 17-18.

13 Macqueen, Alexandra, "Ottawa Watch", [www.firstperspective.ca](http://www.firstperspective.ca/ottawa_watch.html). http://www.firstperspective.ca/ottawa_watch.html

14 Reuben, William, "Civic Engagement, Social Accountability, and Governance Crisis". <http://www.worldbank.org/participation/civicingagement/civicingagementsocialaccountabilitygovernancecrisis.pdf>

The model of a “parallel track strategy” is also effective as Aboriginal agencies and community institutions take an increasingly direct role in delivering health care, education, social welfare, family programmes, and policing, often involving grass-roots organizations including Elders and youth committees. Indeed, within the parts of the country where comprehensive Native land claims have taken effect (Nunavut, the Nisga’a nation, Inuvialuit Settlement Region, etc.), local Aboriginal governments direct the delivery of most public services.

A third track, one of “selective collaboration” with non-Aboriginal government (and increasingly with the private sector) is visible in the increased number of co-managed economic development projects, joint environmental impact assessment programs, co-delivery systems for Aboriginal education, and inner-city housing development projects – for the 50% of Aboriginal Canadians who now live in urban areas. Finally, through a policy of “full endorsement”, Aboriginal agencies often lend support to the policies and programs of non-Native government. One key example is Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the Inuit Tapirisat Kanatami (ITK) support for Canadian ratification of the Kyoto Accord. Others include support by Northern Aboriginals for increased assertions of Canadian sovereignty in the High Arctic, and cooperative accords signed in May by the federal government and the AFN, ITK, the Metis National Council, Native Women’s Council, and the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples.

ONE MAN’S VISION AND A CHALLENGE FOR THE FUTURE

On September 13, 1968 the first Status Indian to sit as a Member of Parliament, Len Marchand, who would become Minister of the Environment and later be appointed to the Senate, first sat in the House of Commons with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker who eight years earlier had successfully fought to extend the federal vote to all Aboriginal people. Marchand rose to outline his philosophy of Aboriginal civic engagement. His words still resonate today:

“I am the first [Status] Indian to sit as a member of this house, and I am conscious of my responsibilities...It is important to the Indian people to know that one of us can become a member. It is important for the younger Indians who are in school and at university to know that, with reasonable hope, they can aspire to become whatever they wish to become and are capable of becoming. It is important for all Canada to know that this is not a land of bigotry and prejudice. It is important for all Canadians to keep it that way...”¹⁵

Dr. Martin Whittles was educated at the University of Lethbridge, the London School of Economics, and the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge. He has undertaken extensive field research in the Canadian High Arctic, and has published internationally on topics including circumpolar ethnography, the Inuvialuit (Western Arctic Inuit), and the history and process of Canadian Aboriginal land claims in a global context. He is Assistant Professor of Social Anthropology and Chair of the Canadian Studies Unit at Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, British Columbia. The former University College of the Cariboo, TRU became Canada’s newest university on April 1, 2005.

15 Marchand, Len and Matt Hughes, *Breaking Trail*, Caitlin Press, Prince George, 2000, p. 87-88.

Aboriginal Peoples Must Work Together

By Kuni Albert

The Aboriginal peoples of Canada, made up of the First Nations, the Metis and the Inuit, are Canada's original diverse society. Rich cultural traditions and belief systems have ensured the survival of languages, knowledge and the people. Past attempts to assimilate Aboriginal peoples have been defeated by the transmission of ancestral knowledge to future generations through oral tradition and historical documents.

Aboriginal people are the fastest evolving group in Canada. Not only have they adapted to mainstream culture, using it as a tool for their own advancement, many are also educated in their own cultures, traditions and languages, making them important contributors to the larger Canadian society and economy.

I believe that we are distinct from those who came here after us. As First Nations people of Canada, we share a common goal: to protect our people and our traditions. Often, however, we do not act on this. Political agendas dictate our relationships ranging from historical family conflicts to land rights. Only when we are committed to establishment of a strong and united Aboriginal nation will we achieve self-determination and self-government within Canada. We must unite to protect our future.

I have learned first-hand that achieving this unity—even on a smaller scale—is easier said than done. As Chief of the First Nations Student Association (FNSA) at the University of Calgary for the 2004/2005 academic year, I attempted to define an Aboriginal person for purposes of the FNSA Constitution. I was surprised and dismayed that we could not unite as a group to protect our identity and acknowledge our ancestors who fought so diligently for freedom, equality, recognition and survival.

I learned that Aboriginal people, so diverse in their customs and traditions, are very loyal to the belief systems of their own nations. Individuals who come from reserves, northern communities or urban areas differ greatly in their understanding of what Aboriginal people represent in Canada. An urban Aboriginal may state that he or she does not believe in defining an Aboriginal person, and that we are equal to all nations within Canada. A person who has lived on a reserve or in an isolated community may have another perspective and want to define the term "Aboriginal" to protect their Treaty Rights, their nation and their community. These ideas can also be reversed and often involve complex interactions between the different Aboriginal nations and communities.

In the particular case I was involved with, the FNSA Constitution had not been amended prior to the 2004/05 academic year, and in attempting to do so, we found there was conflict in what people believe is proper representation of Aboriginal people within the University. The Council agreed that our distinctiveness as Aboriginal people should be recognized and proposed that executive titles be changed from President and Vice-Presidents to Chief and Council. Collectively, we brought the idea to the membership and received such negative responses as "the government named our nations that", "are you being egotistical?", and "who do you think you are". I was distressed when confronted with these statements, and began to wonder why, at the university level, we still were unable to unite.

I am aware and acknowledge that our individual nations' political systems are historically different and, in some instances, very complex. But to influence the politics of this country that dictate our future, I believe Aboriginal people need to be able to work within mainstream politics, while at the same time maintaining our customs.

Aboriginal Peoples Must Work Together

Throughout my academic career I frequently heard of people stating that their purpose in getting a higher education was to go back to their communities or reserves to establish proper relationships, to aid in healing at all levels with their people and nation. However, once their formal education is completed, most do not return to their community or acknowledge the issues faced by Aboriginal people. Once established in their profession they are unreachable. They often are unavailable to act as mentors. A vital link to our youth is severed when those who could be their mentors are not approachable. We must have encouragement from our own people to complete our education, to self-identify and to become leaders.

The Aboriginal peoples are central to the Canadian reality. Historically, First Nations governed themselves through systems that created opportunities to prosper and grow while sustaining the peoples and the environment. The rights to self-determination and self-government have always existed and will continue to do so. For all practical purposes – with the exception of the three northern territories – the majority of Aboriginal people in Canada are not properly represented in government at the regional, provincial or federal levels. The key issue remains in the development of proper relationships based on respect and systems that will provide a role for Aboriginal people in the political, cultural and economic evolution of Canada.

The Canadian government must recognize Aboriginal groups as nations to allow for nation-to-nation discussions to establish positive relationships to bridge barriers. Aboriginal leaders must also “pass the torch” or attempt to involve the future leaders in their political agendas and consult with the next generation to give them input in setting the direction for the future of Aboriginals in Canada. The new generations of Aboriginal people in Canada are aware of society’s demands and are educated on the issues that affect our people.

Today’s Aboriginal leaders fail to consult with the youth about politics and may be creating a barrier for future participation in regional, provincial and federal politics. If we are not consulted and educated by the Aboriginal leaders of today, how can we be expected to influence the agendas of mainstream governments? It is vital for the future of young Aboriginal politicians to participate in current government initiatives and to be recognized as contributors to the agenda of future Aboriginal political participation.

A national roundtable, hosted by the Assembly of First Nations, could be set up to find ways to end the lack of participation of Aboriginal youth in the issues that affect their peoples. The doubt and questions of youth about their Aboriginal leaders would be addressed through discussion. Topics would be youth and Aboriginal driven, but also include national and international issues and current federal, provincial and regional government initiatives. The roundtable discussion would allow young people to voice their concerns, become educated about the political system, and provide input. Similar efforts also could be made at the level of individual First Nations with Chiefs and Councils interacting with their nations’ youth.

A memorandum of understanding between our own nations must be agreed upon and drafted by the Aboriginal people of Canada. Aboriginal leaders, educators and community members continue to work towards more control over their traditional lands, resources and preserving culture through education. More communication and dialogue among First Nations people are paths to understanding and knowledge that will benefit all Canadians.

Canadians pride themselves on their multicultural society and the notion of welcoming people from around the world among their number. Canada is fairly colour blind and open to customs and traditions from abroad. However, as a people, Canadians are still unable to acknowledge the contribution of Canada's Aboriginal peoples. The day that a majority of Canadians are able to do this will be an important step forward not only for Aboriginal Canadians, but the country as a whole.

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Minority Young Adults in Quebec

By Deirdre Meintel

Two words capture the distinguishing feature of most young Quebecers born to immigrant parents – family values.

Much of my research has been focused on youth of immigrant parentage, and more generally, on the “Bill 101 Generation” of young adults in Montreal. They are the offspring of newcomers who were born here after 1977, when the Charter of the French Language became law. They attended French schools and grew up sharing many of the perspectives of their compatriots. But most have a closer involvement with their families, often live at home as young adults, help out when there is a family business, and embrace traditional views of marriage.

A study of young adult children of immigrants (18-22 years of age) conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s examined how life choices that affect social participation (studies, work, social networks, marriage/cohabitation) are negotiated between the young person and the family. The target age group is directly concerned with these issues while remaining in close contact with family roots. Other areas, such as the relationship with their parents’ countries of origin, sense of obligation to the family, autonomy, and respect, were also explored.

Ethnographic observations by our assistants greatly enriched the data analysis.¹⁶ Sixty interviews with minority youth were complemented by twenty with parents, and twenty with youth from a French-speaking Quebec background. My more recent research (with Josiane Le Gall and Marie-Nathalie Le Blanc) is on identity transmission by young parents in mixed unions. It includes sixteen cases

of adult children of immigrants who are of the same cohort or a bit younger than those interviewed in the earlier study, and who are now at a new stage of life.¹⁷ Other research in which I have been involved concerns linguistic behaviour and attitudes in the 18-35 age group.

The earlier research found nearly all of our interviewees were still living with their parents, unlike many of their French-speaking Quebec counterparts. The notion of “life scheduling” among the interviewees, inculcated by parents, put finishing studies first, before pursuing long-term career goals, marriage, and subsequently setting up an autonomous household.¹⁸ Moreover, family life for these subjects, as opposed to the French-speaking Quebecers I interviewed, often included substantial housework, unpaid work in a family business, contributing financially to the household, etc.¹⁹

While the research did not focus directly on political participation, it nevertheless generated a lot of useful information about involvement in civil society. The most important findings relate to identity. For example, youth identified strongly with the family values attributed to their group. This identification formed the basis of positive feelings about their ethnic origins and identification with it. Yet, this does not exclude feelings of belonging to Montreal, Quebec, Canada and the international community. The great majority hoped to make their lives in Montreal, but also to travel and, in some cases, to work abroad. Many were attracted to occupations (in travel, interpreting etc.) that made use of their cultural links and multilingual backgrounds.

16 The research was made possible by grants from the FCAR (Québec), the Secretariate of State (Canada), the Ministère des communautés culturelles et de l’immigration (Québec) and CAFIR (Université de Montréal). Field work assistants included Danielle Bélanger, Fernanda Claudio, Sonia Grmela, Francine Juteau and Spyridoula Xenocostas. Mauro Peressini, Josiane Le Gall and Marie-Nathalie LeBlanc participated in the analysis of research data.

17 Meintel 2002; Meintel et Kahn, forthcoming

18 Research methodology and analysis was inspired partly by the Life Course Analysis approach of social historians such as Hareven (1974, 1978) and Elder, (1977).

19 For the sake of comparability, only Franco-Quebecois living with their parents were interviewed.

Interviewees frequently expressed positive views about Montreal and its diversity.²⁰ But while they identified strongly as “Montréalais”, they were somewhat ambivalent about their Quebec identity. Many felt, as one put it, “Québécois plus”, but many others felt that French-speaking Quebecers would not see them as “real” Québécois. They also cite the similarity of the desire to maintain language and culture that is shared both by different ethnic communities and the French-speaking majority. Many spontaneously described themselves as “Canadian”.

Political interest was primarily in international issues, particularly those that affected the country or global region from which their parents originated. Many had visited their parents’ homeland or hoped to do so, and some hoped to work there. This has been expressed even more strongly by adults of the same cohort in more recent research.²¹ Interviewees felt that their sense of ethnic identity, and with it their political orientations, had evolved with time. Initially, many said that at the beginning of adolescence, they mainly wanted to blend in with their peers in the majority community. However, by age 16 or so, nearly all had become more interested in their ethnic roots. Often this brought about new political awareness of international issues affecting the country or region of origin. In some cases it also led to involvement in political causes that related to that country, as well as membership in voluntary associations based on ethnic background.

One politically relevant aspect of the values expressed by this age group of minority young people is rejection of the “individualism” attributed to their French-speaking Quebec peers. Marriage, rather than cohabitation, which is very widespread in Quebec was preferred by most; it is seen as an institution that unites families, not just two individuals.²² Personal projects (work, study) are partly conditioned by needs of others in the parental household. The rejection of individualism is usually expressed in terms of family-centred values, but also extends to the wider community, in that family values are seen as closely associated with the individual’s ethnic group. Young people feel that their actions affect the standing of the family in the wider ethnic community. In this sense, youth of immigrant parentage appear far more oriented to social collectivities (via familial, ethnic and international solidarities) than youth from the majority community whom we interviewed. Moreover, minority youth were more likely to participate in religious activities, at least occasionally. Family, church and ethnic associations are more likely to engage the energies of these young people without their work being labelled as “volunteering”.

A recent survey of 1025 first and second generation Canadians between the ages of 18-35, conducted by a sovereigntist group, Génération Québec, found that their political culture is similar to that of other Québécois of their age group.²³ The study focused on attitudes related to language and Quebec sovereignty. On this score, it found that the old cleavage between “them” and “us” no longer applies. Some fifteen years ago, our interviewees referred to themselves as “we ethnics”, in contrast to the majority Québécois. Indeed, today, the cleavage also seems less marked in our research. Yet it should be noted that in the same survey, “Canadian” is the primary affiliation for 34% of those contacted, “Montréalais” for 29% and

20 See also Helly and Van Schendel, 2001.

21 Meintel et Kahn, forthcoming.

22 Lapierre-Adamcyk et al., 1999.

23 Beaulieu 2003; the study is available on the Génération Québec website, (<http://www.generationquebec.org/nouvelles.html>).

“Québécois” for 28%. I would also venture to hypothesize that the transnational orientation of this group (young adults born outside of Canada or whose parents were) is greater than for their Quebecois peers.²⁴

The same survey finds further similarities between minority youth and their French-speaking Quebec counterparts in terms of their lack of involvement in political parties. However, almost three-fourths (71%) of those surveyed have been members of a social or community organization, which is probably higher than is the case for their majority peers.²⁵ Minority youth were very active in demonstrations against the war in Iraq, and also participated in recent protests of cuts to bursaries that mobilized students across Quebec.

In conclusion, we may note that minority group young people are becoming more politically visible in Quebec. One example is François Rebello, whose father was from India and his mother from Quebec, one-time president of the Fédération Étudiante Universitaire du Québec (FEUC), who ran for the Bloc Québécois in 2004. Another is Akos Verboczy, born in Hungary, and schooled in French in Montreal, also held office in the FEUC. He is now a commissioner for Conseil scolaire de Montréal and active in the Bloc Québécois. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the unintended consequences of Jacques Parizeau’s remark about “the ethnic vote” in his speech following the 1995 sovereignty referendum was to give minority group members of the “Génération 101” a particularly important role to play in Quebec political life.

Deirdre Meintel received her Master’s and Ph.D. from Brown University. She is professor of anthropology at the Université de Montréal and Director of the Groupe de recherche Ethnicité et Société. She has published widely on the Cape Verde Islands, on migration, and on identity in Montreal. In recent years she has also worked on issues related to religion and modernity.

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24 Meintel 1994, 2000; Simard, 2003.

25 I have not been able to find comparable data for this age group as a whole in Quebec.

Turning the Skeptic into a Dreamer

By Monia Mazigh

Whenever I reflect about the 2004 federal election campaign, I remember a middle-aged man who was clearly a member of a visible minority.

I was the New Democrat candidate in Ottawa South riding and, at the time our paths crossed, I was campaigning and asking local businesses to put up my signs. The man approached me in a store and said: "I never voted for the past 30 years because I have never trusted politicians. But this election is different, I am going to vote and I will vote for you and will encourage my friends to do the same."

My campaign office, near the store, was a busy hive of volunteers. Young educated women offered help and support; new Canadians pitched in (for many, it was their first active involvement in politics). Mainstream Canadians, who did not take their democratic rights for granted, completed the team. All worked as hard as they could during that critical six-week period.

I did not get elected, but we all celebrated an experience in civic and political engagement that brought new Canadians together with those born here to work in a fundamental exercise of democratic rights. This, for me, was the greatest success.

I grew up in Tunisia and came to Canada as a landed immigrant to pursue an academic career. I was never politically active, but I always followed the political scene closely, both locally and internationally. It was a way for me to remain informed and to feel connected to my society. Political engagement, and in particular the right to choose a political representative, has been a struggle in many societies. It was an uphill battle for the French during the 18th century; it was a major struggle for the suffragettes in the 20th century; and it is still a struggle for many disenfranchised groups throughout the world.

Being a candidate opened my eyes. During the campaign, I met with different communities in Ottawa-South. These communities help to enrich the cultural life of Canada and its economy, making us the open and tolerant society for which we are famous.

But the more I campaigned, the more I learned. It became clear to me that we were not doing enough to reach out to all communities and, in particular, new, or first-generation, Canadians. I was very saddened to discover that for many new immigrants voting was not one of their priorities. In their thinking, partly inherited from their country of origin, political engagement was restricted to the elite. Unfortunately, our politicians, willingly or unwillingly, reinforce this myth by helping their constituents only when there is an electoral stand-off. Some candidates, for example, promised the immigrant kids soccer balls in return for their support. These same candidates, if elected, do not care much about the needs of these new Canadians until the next electoral battle. This should never happen in a true democracy. Government as a tool of integration and inclusiveness should promote political engagement – or any kind of civic engagement for that matter. It is an ongoing process and not a one-time promise.

In its narrowest sense, being engaged in politics means choosing the party that represents best one's vision of society and best serves one's interests.

In my opinion, political engagement is not restricted to party membership. Participating in a demonstration is a form of political engagement. Volunteering in communities is yet another form. And casting a vote is an additional expression of engagement.

I became more politically active for a very special reason.

I came to public attention when my husband, Maher Arar, was sent by US authorities to Syria where he was tortured, imprisoned for almost one year and then eventually released.

Turning the Skeptic into a Dreamer

My immediate reaction to this ordeal was not to accept this injustice; I stood up and asked for answers. When I wrote a letter to my Member of Parliament, held vigils in front of the centennial flame, and met with ministers and MPs, these activities constituted political engagement. I was not doing this as part of a narrow political agenda. I was exercising my right as a citizen to speak and call for justice. That is what political engagement is all about.

Citizens are becoming more and more skeptical about politicians. It appears that some politicians are slowly losing contact with their constituents. Some people now perceive all politicians as selfish, corrupt and arrogant. I remember a discussion I had with one Canadian in front of his door about how much he trusted politicians. He told me, "Once you are on the Hill you all forget us." What he said is partially true, but what he forgot to mention is that it is up to us as citizens to put pressure on our MPs to act on their promises. One way of doing this is to write to them and ask them to act on issues. Another way is to protest and march when we want them to pay attention to our concerns. Keeping democracy healthy and alive is a collective duty that encompasses the elected and their constituents: politicians must build trust with their constituents; voters, by being vocal and active, must help politicians or, if necessary, force them to keep their commitments.

This brings me to the question of whether or not new Canadians are really less engaged.

Answering yes can be similar to falling into the trap of labeling youth as apathetic, cynical, or disengaged – and thus perpetuating a view that is not sustained by facts. Many of the new Canadians I met and know are politically aware and committed. Many came to Canada with a great deal of experience and knowledge. However, a number of them become disappointed because they don't feel that they are really represented in government. They do not identify with politicians.

For many new Canadians, such issues as discrimination, racial profiling, job opportunities and foreign credentials are their top priorities. Yet, many politicians are unaware of, or refuse even to acknowledge these issues, let alone learn more about them.

When I ran in the last federal election, I encouraged people from various groups to cast their ballot, not because it was a political duty, but simply because it was one way among many others to develop a sense of their very real value to Canadian society.

I worked with many dedicated volunteers in the campaign office. For most, it was their first taste of politics, but all were motivated by renewed hope in what could be achieved through political involvement. With a little bit of hope, the skeptic becomes a dreamer.

Dr. Monia Mazigh is a mother, an activist and a researcher. She lives with her family in Ottawa. She received a PhD in Finance from McGill University. She is fluent in French, English and Arabic. In the last federal election, Dr. Mazigh ran unsuccessfully in Ottawa South for the New Democratic Party. Her leadership and dedication garnered her a nomination as The Globe and Mail's 2003 "Nation-Builder of the Year". Dr. Mazigh was selected as a Canadian hero by Time Magazine in June 2004.

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