

Claire Hoy ? It's merely a matter of commitment

To its credit, Canada has long held the distinction of being among the most generous countries in the world when it comes to allowing outsiders to immigrate here.

Last year alone, for example, some 275,515 permanent residents decided to make Canada their home, the seventh consecutive year of the highest sustained levels in our history, and what Immigration and Multiculturalism Minister Jason Kenney describes as 'a key part of the government's plan to grow our economy, spur job creation, and ensure long-term prosperity for all Canadians.'

And, as we all know, the vast majority of newcomers arrive in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal.

Indeed, between 2006 and 2011, about one-third of all immigrants came to Toronto, and more than half of the total settled in Ontario. About one in five Canadian residents are now foreign-born and 6.3 million, or 19 per cent of the population, consider themselves members of a visible minority group.

Immigration, of course, is not without its problems. But overall, Canada is a vast country with a relatively small population. And with birth rates here ? and in most places ? not keeping up with demand, immigration provides the economic opportunities which come with growing domestic markets.

That's as it should be.

And people who opt to live here are ? quite rightly ? entitled to send their kids to our schools, take part in our health and other social programs, and do most of the things that full-fledged Canadian citizens can do.

After all, they're also ?entitled? ? if we may use the word here ? to pay taxes.

But there are limits to non-citizenship. At least there should be, until the time they take the necessary steps and become full citizens of this great country. It's not exactly onerous. At most, if they're interested, they might miss one municipal election before they are eligible to vote. Big deal.

All of which brings us, as you may have guessed, to the wrongheaded ? and truly disrespectful ? 21-20 vote last week by Toronto City Council to ask the province for permission to allow non-residents to vote in municipal elections.

No bloody way, it says here.

We talk a lot these days about ?rights? and ?privileges,? but in this conversation we don't hear as much about ?responsibilities? as we should.

Surely a key ?responsibility? for any newcomer, if they wish to make Canada their permanent home, is to do what needs to be done to earn their citizenship.

If being a citizen has no meaning, then what's the point of even having the category?

It is true that some other countries allow non-citizens to vote in municipal elections ? New Zealand even allows them to vote in national elections.

But so what? Other countries do all sorts of things we don't do ? like limiting abortion, for example; we're the ONLY country that doesn't have any legal limits at all.

The argument used to convince councillors ? largely those on the left of centre (who seem to think that newcomers are more inclined to vote on their side of the ledger) ? is that in the last municipal elections about 246,000 residents ? or roughly 16 per cent of the population ? were ineligible.

That may be, but the fact is about half of those could have been eligible had they chosen to follow through and take out full citizenship and the other half ? if they care at all ? could be eligible to vote in the next election.

There is a significant difference ? or there should be ? between living in a country and committing yourself to full-fledged citizenship.

It's kind of like the difference between shacking up and getting formally married. It's called making a full commitment. And when you do that, there should be some benefits.

Otherwise, as we've said, why bother?

You may say that it is easy for me to say, since I was lucky enough to be born here. But I wouldn't expect to move say to the U.S. or Italy or the U.K., or anywhere else, and immediately demand my name be put on the voter's list.

There's a process to follow to show that country that you mean business, that it's just not a convenient way station en route to somewhere else.

It is now up to Premier Kathleen Wynne to say yea or nay. While it may be the trendy thing to say yea, it's the wrong thing.

Let us hope, at least this once, she does the right thing.

