



BARRIERS TO CITIZENSHIP

FOR

NEWCOMERS TO CANADA

In recent years, it has become harder for newcomers to get Canadian citizenship. Increasingly difficult tests, more costly applications, additional requirements, longer waits and frustrating red tape have stood in the way of newcomers becoming citizens and thus being able to participate fully in Canadian society with all rights. These barriers are having a disproportionate impact on more vulnerable newcomers, such as refugees and more isolated or low-income newcomers.

Canada has traditionally encouraged newcomers to become citizens, as a way to strengthen our society and promote the integration of newcomers. Now citizenship is increasingly being presented as an exclusive reward to be given only to those who best overcome the hurdles of integration and satisfy economic criteria.

LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS

Since 2012, applicants for citizenship must provide, at their own expense, proof of their knowledge of English or French. Previously, their language skills were tested as part of the citizenship application process.

Providing acceptable proof can be difficult:

- The government accepts only limited forms of proof. Many newcomers have to pay for a special test from authorized testing centres (costing about \$200).
- Testing is not equally available throughout Canada. If you don't live in a big city, you may have to travel to get to a testing site, at additional cost, or wait months for a test. In some regions, testing may be more expensive.
- Refugees and family class immigrants are more affected by the new rules, since most economic immigrants have had language assessed when they immigrated.
- Some newcomers take government-funded language training once in Canada and can use documentation from those courses as proof of languages. Others, such as refugees paying off transportation loans or refugee claimants, must work, and learn English or French on the job or in classes offered by community organizations. Their income may be very modest, but they will need to pay for a language test.

The new rules cause special problems for newcomers who have difficulties learning English or French:

- The level of language knowledge required is not supposed to have increased, but in practice it seems that it has.
- Learning a new language can be particularly hard for refugees who have survived torture or other severe trauma. Similarly, refugees who have spent decades in a refugee camp or without opportunities to go to school can have significant challenges. In theory they can apply for a humanitarian exemption, but it is now more difficult to have these factors considered.
- Isolated newcomers such as some women and elderly persons who are full-time caregivers often have limited access to language classes.
- The language tests favour people with higher levels of education. Previously, applicants could be tested through a conversation with the citizenship judge.

If Bill C-24 passes, more people will have to meet language requirements, both younger and older applicants than is currently the case.

INCREASE IN FEES

Citizenship fees were doubled as of February 2014 (from \$200 to \$400). This represents a lot of money for someone on a low income, such as a young student or a single-parent family. Some people may not apply for lack of money.

RESIDENCE QUESTIONNAIRE

Since May 2012, the government has asked many more applicants to fill in the very detailed Residence Questionnaire (RQ). Some applicants spend weeks tracking down the information requested, and then must wait months before institutions supply the documents. The time allowed to respond to the questionnaire is less than the time generally needed to gather all the documents. Some of the documents cost money to obtain. Citizenship applicants have reported feeling discouraged when they are given the RQ – it can make them feel as though they are being regarded as suspicious or fraudulent, and sends an unwelcoming message.

LONG DELAYS

Due to backlogs, citizenship applicants currently face delays of 2-3 years while their applications are processed. The wait is even longer for those who must complete the Residence Questionnaire. This means that newcomers can't participate fully in Canadian society for years, even though they meet all the legal requirements for citizenship.

ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

Many applicants report frustration with the administrative process. A large proportion of applications are returned as incomplete, sometimes in error. It is difficult to communicate with officials about the progress of one's application.

CESSATION

Recent changes to the law mean that people in Canada who have refugee status can more easily lose their right to remain in Canada. If a person who came as a refugee shows on their application for Canadian citizenship that they travelled to their home country, this information may be used to launch an application for cessation. The potential consequence is loss of permanent residence and deportation from Canada. This means that applying for citizenship may be risky for refugees, thus deterring full integration into Canadian society.

"I worry that all these barriers to becoming a citizen will undo one of the things Canada has been good at: making newcomers feel welcome and encouraging them to be full members of Canadian society." - Loly Rico, CCR President

These obstacles in the path to citizenship are having a damaging effect on the integration of newcomers, who are denied the rights of full participation, notably the right to vote. For refugees, who have no other country, the effect is particularly severe.



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