

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
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CITIZENSHIP

An address by The Honourable Colin Gibson,
Secretary of State, to the Kitchener-Waterloo
Rotary Club, April 19, 1948.

To-day I have taken "Citizenship" as the subject of my remarks, and I should at once explain that I have not done so through any belief that your members are not good citizens.

On the contrary, the very fact that you are here, as Rotarians, is a guarantee of your qualifications as good citizens, and of your interest in citizenship.

For many years most of us who reside in Canada have considered ourselves as Canadians, although we dimly realized that internationally we were regarded as British Subjects domiciled in Canada.

As is well known, Canada's contribution in the First World War, earned for us the status of nationhood, which was recognized by our being called upon to sign the Treaty of Versailles; and this status as an autonomous nation was confirmed by the Statute of Westminster in 1931.

But our status as individuals was not so clearly defined, and at International Conferences our delegates were referred to, not as Canadians, but as Canadian British Subjects.

In order to distinguish Canadians from other British Subjects, we passed a Canadian Nationals Act in 1921, but this rather complicated the issue by defining a Canadian National as "a British Subject who is a Canadian Citizen, within the meaning of the Immigration Act".

In addition, we had a Naturalization Act by which a foreigner could become a British Subject, so that by studying the Naturalization Act, the Immigration Act and the Canadian Nationals Act, a person could discover how to become a Canadian National!

Our new Canadian Citizenship Act, which came into force on the 1st January, 1947, cleared up many of the difficulties and uncertainties of the past, and made clear our right to be officially recognized as Canadians.

Under its provisions, all persons born in Canada automatically become Canadian citizens, and cannot be deprived of their citizenship unless they themselves take definite steps to acquire other nationality.

Those who are naturalized here become citizens and retain their citizenship so long as they remain here. Should they leave for prolonged periods, and fail to report, their citizenship can only be revoked after an absence of six years.

At the same time, many of the anomalies that had previously existed have been cured. For example, married women were formerly classed with infants and lunatics as "persons under a disability". On marriage, a woman automatically took the nationality of her husband, and there was no way by which she could divest herself of his nationality while he was alive.

Now, under the Citizenship Act, married women are given equal rights with other individuals, and many decide for themselves the nationality which they wish to retain or adopt.

I do not intend to-day to go into all the details of the Act, but to avoid any possible misapprehension as to our continuing status as British Subjects, I should point out that Section 26 of the Act definitely states "a Canadian Citizen is a British Subject".

There may be some people who fear that our action in Canada in creating Canadian Citizenship may tend to weaken our Commonwealth ties, but in order to reassure them I would point out that our Act has been adopted as a model by other parts of the Commonwealth.

It is a development in our Commonwealth structure, and only a few weeks ago a Bill was introduced at Westminster adopting the principle of our Canadian Act and differentiating between "British Subjects" and "Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies".

What is of interest to us to-day is not so much the details of the Act, but the problems that arise as a result of the Act.

I have no doubt that you will all agree with me that if we expect our people to take citizenship seriously they should understand its implications, and recognize that the privileges of citizenship carry with them definite obligations and responsibilities.

When an applicant for naturalization comes up before a Court for examination, he is required to satisfy the Judge that, amongst other things, he is of good character, has an adequate knowledge of either the English or French language, as well as knowledge of the responsibilities and privileges of Citizenship.

In the past, as may be well imagined, there was a wide variation throughout the country in the standard required by the various Judges. Some were satisfied with a perfunctory examination while others were rigid. In some cases applicants were turned down through lack of qualifications, while no facilities had been provided for their instruction.

In order to secure some degree of uniformity throughout the country, I wrote to all the Judges asking for their opinions as to the minimum standards that they would recommend, and a summary was made of their replies.

Briefly, they considered that good character should consist of something more than a negative police record; and that adequate knowledge of English or French should consist of an ability to read a simple letter or newspaper.

As to knowledge of our rights and responsibilities as citizens, it is more difficult to set a standard; but it was considered that some knowledge of our history, geography and form of government should be required.

Not long ago I received a letter from a Judge in the West asking my opinion as to the suitability of a woman who had applied for citizenship. "She has raised a fine family" he said, "Some of whom served overseas with our forces, but she has little knowledge of our historical or political background."

I need scarcely say that I replied that in my opinion the woman had proved her qualifications as a good citizen far more effectively than if she had trained herself to recognize the names and faces of all our politicians.

A minimum standard is set more as a guide than as an actual measure, and it is of assistance not only to our Judges but also to the Citizenship Branch.

Our Act empowers the Secretary of State "to take measures to provide facilities to enable applicants to receive instruction". At the same time, it must be recognized that under the provisions of the British North America Act, education is a prerogative of the Provinces - and some of the Provinces are exceedingly touchy on what they consider to be any intrusion on Provincial rights!

As a first step in providing instruction in Citizenship the problem was taken up with the Canadian Education Council, a body which has in its membership representatives of all the Provincial Departments of Education.

That body considered the best methods of providing a common standard of training throughout the country, and appointed a special committee to study and report on the subject.

A few weeks ago, a joint meeting was held in Montreal - called at my suggestion by the Canadian Citizenship Council - at which 92 national and local organizations including the Canadian Legion, Labour, Chambers of Commerce, Womens organizations and many others were represented. A strong and representative Council was set up, under the Chairmanship of General Crerar.

This Council, which is representative of a wide cross section of our national life, will not only do what it can to co-ordinate the work of the Dominion and the Provinces, but also encourage national and local organizations to undertake their share of Citizenship training.

I would not like to have it assumed that up to the present little or nothing has been done, as great efforts have already been made, and with considerable success in some localities, to assist our newcomers; but the facilities available to-day are by no means sufficient to meet the need.

Pamphlets have been prepared to assist immigrants, and these are being printed in many languages.

Before immigrants are brought to this country, the Department of Labour has arranged for the distribution of our publications "How to Become a Canadian Citizen" and "Facts about Canada", together with "The Pocket Book of Basic English".

On arriving in Canada, the immigrant receives immediate assistance from such organizations as the National Employment Service, the Legion, the Y.W.C.A., the Catholic Women's League and the Order the Sisters of Service, and efforts are being made to keep in touch with them in order to help them to become established here.

The problem of training the immigrant, after arrival, raises a wide variety of problems, and seems to have been tackled most effectively in Ontario. Here the Provincial Department of Education has organized citizenship courses in many of the principal Urban centres, and I understand that at present they have organized 260 classes throughout the Province with an attendance of over 4,500, and further classes are in process of organization.

In addition, many classes have been formed by the various ethnic groups themselves.

In Northern Ontario, many of our immigrants are scattered throughout the Lumber Camps and Gold Mines, but through the co-operation of these industries, teachers are being sent into the Camps, employed by the companies on a part time basis by day, while providing instruction at night. Approximately 2,000 are receiving instruction in this way.

In addition, weekly broadcasts in the Ukrainian language are provided for Ukrainian workers in the bush, using a script prepared by the Ontario Department of Education, and receiving sets provided by the employers.

These are examples of what has already been accomplished, but they are only a beginning.

To-day, more than ever before, we have a need in this country, of bringing to the attention of our people, the privileges which they enjoy as members of a free, democratic nation; as well as their duties and responsibilities as Citizens.

For many years when nations were at war they were represented by professional armies while more recently wars have developed into conflicts between nations in arms.

To-day we have reached a further stage in which we find offensive action directed, not against the state only, but against its people individually. We find that a direct attempt is being made by Communists to persuade our people to transfer their loyalty to another state.

In this type of warfare our citizens must be prepared to defend themselves, and they must be provided with the material necessary for their defence to enable them to meet this Communist propaganda.

Some time ago we witnessed the return to Europe of hundreds of persons of Yugoslav origin, who had been led to believe that they were returning to a better land -- a land of opportunity and of promise.

Many of them have since come back to Canada sadly disillusioned, but it should not have been necessary for them to travel to Europe to learn of the advantages of life in Canada.

We know that in Canada, there are Communists at work, endeavouring to stir up discord and discontent. Of the 78 foreign language papers printed in Canada, no less than 19 are preaching Communism, and for those who do not understand our language these are their only source of information.

Some people suggest that the Communist party should be outlawed and their papers banned, but I do not believe that this is the answer to their challenge. If we have nothing better to offer than the Communists, then we have no excuse for opposing them; but if, as we generally believe, our system is superior, then our people, of all groups and classes, have a right to know in what ways they benefit by supporting our democratic system.

In my remarks I have been referring to the problems of those who immigrate to this country, but it must also be recognized that each year approximately a quarter of a million young people, born in Canada, come of age and accept the responsibilities of citizenship.

Does anyone believe that we are doing enough in this country, to bring to the attention of these young people the benefits that they enjoy as members of a free democratic nation, and of their responsibility to protect and defend these rights?

Unfortunately we are inclined to sit back and take for granted our present way of life, ignoring the forces that are at work to undermine our democratic system.

We accept freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of worship, as natural rights; but are inclined to forget that we only enjoy those freedoms so long as we are on guard to protect them.

I do not want to do to-day, what is so often done, and that is point out our problems and offer no solution. But the solution is not easy, and it entails rousing the national consciousness of our people, and co-ordinating training activities throughout our country.

We must be prepared to meet the Communist challenge by defeating it on its merits, by demonstrating that our democratic system is superior to the Communist programme of rule by force.

This task is being undertaken by the Canadian Citizenship Council, but it can only succeed if given whole-hearted support by our Departments of Education, our Churches, our Welfare Organizations, and I may say our Service Clubs.

I know perfectly well of the splendid work that Statarians have undertaken in many fields, and I admire you for it, but if I may make a suggestion it would be that there is still more work to be done.

You in the Rotary Club listen to many speakers, you develop your minds and acquire knowledge, but are you using, or passing on, the knowledge so gained for the benefit of the community.

You have opportunities of learning something of what goes on behind the Iron Curtain, and of forming your own opinions as to the relative advantages of our respective ways of life, but are you doing enough to offset the menace of Communism?

We know that the Communist party is highly organized, that at an election - any election - all members of the party will cast their votes - at whatever inconvenience.

But what percentage of the rest of us takes any interest in political affairs, or even in the selection of our candidates? Unfortunately the figure is very small.

We are all partners, or shareholders, in this great country, Canada, and can we afford to stand idly by and take the risk of a minority group taking over, as happened in Czechoslovakia?

You are all business or professional men. What would you do if a company in which you were financially interested was in danger of being wrecked by opposition interests?

Would you quietly await developments or would you take active steps to safeguard your investment?

To-day we can no longer afford to be spectators, taking a casual interest in national and domestic affairs, but must be prepared to actively support, by word and by deed, the political parties and those national organizations in which we have confidence and which are working for the welfare and development of our country.

I have mentioned the Canadian Citizenship Council as a body which is attempting to co-ordinate the efforts of our national and local organizations to promote better citizenship, and I know that it will welcome in its task the support of the Rotary Clubs of Canada.