

# Immigrants Made Canada

JACK GRANATSTEIN

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Let me begin with one simple fact: Toronto's public schools declare themselves the most multicultural in the world. One school, Thorncliffe Park Public School in Toronto's east end, has 1,913 students speaking 54 languages. What that means is obvious — Canada today is a nation of immigrants.

But what we forget too easily is that Canada always was a country of immigrants. Everyone who ever lived here came from someplace else, including the First Nations whose ancestors crossed into North America over a land bridge from Siberia. Everyone. The original European immigrants of Canada were the French followed by the Loyalists, the losers in the American Revolution, who settled in the late 1780s in what is now Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Quebec. Most were of British origin, devoted to King George III and Great Britain, but there were also others of German, Dutch and other origins, as well as blacks, most but not all slaves. Those "originals" largely shaped Canada's population mix for almost two hundred years.

Let me demonstrate. The Canada into which I was born in 1939 had a population of some 11.5 million, according to the 1941 Census figures, which was made up of those of British and French origin (50 percent and 30 percent respectively) and the others (20 percent). The others were of German, Ukrainian, Scandinavian, and Dutch origin in the main, with a scattering of other ethnicities. There were few blacks, Chinese, Japanese, or South Asians, the Canadian population almost wholly white.

Overwhelmingly the population was Christian with a few hundred thousand Jews and a handful of other denominations. The corporate, cultural, and political leaders in Canada were overwhelmingly drawn from among those of British origin, and French-speaking Quebecers did not have anything like their fair share of economic or political power.

It is certainly fair to say that nation-building, such as it was, aimed to establish a British type of society in Canada. Culturally, this was reflected in Canada's political, economic and social institutions. In law, all Canadians were defined as British subjects until the passage of the Canadian Citizenship Act in 1947, and a variety of cultural symbols ranging from the monarchy to the flag and to the names of army regiments showed the British underpinnings of English-speaking Canada. By and large, the government either ignored racial and ethnic differences or worked to turn all into British Canadians in attitude if not in ethnic origin.

Obviously, Canada is very different today. In the 2006 Census, the most recent, the "other" category, now with some 200 ethnicities, has reached 50 percent of the 31 million population. For example, there were reported to be 1.35 million Chinese, 962,000 East Indians, and 436,000 Filipinos, and one in six Canadian residents was a visible minority. Christians still predominate (some 70 percent), but as recently as 1951, 96 percent of the population was Christian. Today, there are far more Roman Catholics than Protestants (40 percent of the Canadian population is Catholic, only 30 percent Protestant), and Muslims are approaching one million, far more than those of Jewish belief. Those with no religion number one in six of the population.

In Greater Toronto, the nation's largest city, very close to half of the 5.1 million population were immigrants, an increase of 27 percent in five years, and more than four in 10, or 43 percent of the population, were visible minorities, primarily Chinese, South Asian or black. India and China now provide most of the immigrants to Canada and Toronto, and in an ordinary year at least 250,000 immigrants come to the country, more than four in 10 of them heading to Toronto. At the time I was born and for my first 15 years, by contrast, the British Isles were the main source of immigrants to Canada.

So Canada has changed, and certainly much for the better. There are Members of Parliament in turbans, the Chief of Defence Staff is of Ukrainian ethnicity and the previous Governor-General Michaëlle Jean is a Haitian woman immigrant who succeeded a Chinese female immigrant, Adrienne Clarkson. Jews hold three of the nine seats on the Supreme Court; a Jamaican-Chinese-Canadian multimillionaire made a huge donation to add a giant extension to the Royal Ontario Museum and a group of Italian-Canadian millionaires matched that with equally grand gifts to the redeveloped Art Gallery of Ontario; the public service is almost as mixed as the nation; and Toronto's public schools, for example, declare themselves the most multicultural in the world. It may even be true. Mixed-race marriages are increasingly common in the larger cities, and adoptions abroad, especially in China and Africa, have created multiracial families all across the country.

There can be no doubt that this is a great success story. Immigration changed the old Canada, and immigration is continuing to do so. What the Canada of 2150 will look like, no one can say — except that it will not look at all like the Canada I grew up in.

*Historian J.L. Granatstein is editor of The Canadian Experience. He writes on Canadian political and military and on foreign and defence policy.*