

The Citizenship Handbook

A GUIDE TO DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR CANADIANS



B.C. Civil Liberties Association

Murray Mollard

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B.C. Civil Liberties Association
550 – 1188 West Georgia Street
Vancouver, B.C. V6E 4A2

Tel: 604.687.2919
www.bccla.org
info@bccla.org

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This edition of the *Handbook* reflects a shift in focus that was made to reflect the opportunity to promote its use to a larger audience. Some references to new Canadians have been removed making this edition more accessible to all Canadians, native born or immigrant.

Murray Mollard
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Preface

This *Handbook* is designed to help young Canadians, people who have received their Canadian citizenship or those who hope to become citizens soon. Citizens of Canada have special rights and responsibilities which visitors to our country do not share.

This *Handbook* therefore does not discuss the specific rights and responsibilities of:

- ✓ landed immigrants
- ✓ refugee claimants, and
- ✓ those holding a temporary visitor or residence visa.

However, they still may find this *Handbook* useful if they want to understand citizenship in Canada. It may also be useful to native-born Canadians, who often take their democratic rights and responsibilities for granted.

We hope that the information and advice in this Handbook encourages you to participate fully in the democratic life of Canada.

Readers should know that *The Citizenship Handbook* is also available in Punjabi and Vietnamese.

- i** The English version is available on-line at www.bccla.org/05pubs.html.

If you have any suggestions on how the *Handbook* might be improved, please contact the B.C. Civil Liberties Association.

The B.C. Civil Liberties Association is a non-profit, non-partisan charitable organization that works to protect the civil liberties of Canadians. The BCCLA accepts complaints from the public, undertakes law reform and public education and occasionally goes to court to fight for our freedoms.

As you will discover, Canada encourages you to share your ideas and perspectives.

How This Book Works

We have divided this *Handbook* into six chapters:

- ☑ *Chapter 1 introduces the topic of citizenship.*
- ☑ *Chapter 2 discusses values Canadians share.*
- ☑ *Chapter 3 explains Canada’s political systems.*
- ☑ *Chapter 4 talks about the protection of your rights and freedoms.*
- ☑ *Chapter 5 gives advice on making the political system work for you.*
- ☑ *Chapter 6 describes your rights and responsibilities in dealing with government agencies.*
- ☑ *Chapter 7 lists free legal resources.*



Chapter I

Introduction

You may have many questions about being a Canadian citizen.

- ☑ *What does it mean to be a citizen of Canada?*
- ☑ *Why should I be interested in politics or government?*
- ☑ *What important values do Canadians share?*
- ☑ *How does Canada's political system work?*
- ☑ *What are my rights as a Canadian citizen?*
- ☑ *What are my responsibilities as a citizen?*
- ☑ *How can I help make positive changes in Canadian society?*
- ☑ *What can I expect when I ask government agencies for help?*

We have created this *Handbook* to help you find answers to these important questions.

At the same time, all citizens must be concerned about complaints about the government. In a democracy it is all of us together as citizens who determine the laws of our country.

Democracy is the system of government that allows all citizens to participate in decisions that affect their lives. We do this by electing governments and by participating in democratic life.

One way to understand Canada's democracy is to imagine a person coming to our country and asking, "Who is in charge here?" The answer should be: "We are all in charge here. There is no one person in charge."

You may find this idea a bit unrealistic. Certain experiences in your life in Canada may make you feel powerless, especially when you deal with government. In a democracy with more than 30 million people, this feeling is

natural and perhaps unavoidable. But it is important to remember that we as democratic citizens share authority to govern ourselves. Canada is special because it is possible for you to change society. Sometimes it will be up to you, alone or together with others, to change a feeling of powerlessness into a feeling of being in control and making a difference.

No democracy, even Canada's, can ever be perfect. But Canada does offer us real opportunities to shape our society.

Citizens have both responsibilities and rights.

We have a responsibility to recognize each other's rights as citizens. We have a responsibility to obey the law, and to deal responsibly with those people we have given special authority, such as police and government officials.

Democracy balances these responsibilities with many basic rights. Our government officials must treat each of us with respect, and must honour the various rights and freedoms which we possess as citizens. Democracy guarantees these rights to us in the law.

Of course, not all our freedoms and rights can be guaranteed by law. Basic rules about respecting other people must also be a way of life for each of us.

Even where our rights are guaranteed by law, the law alone is not enough to protect them. For democracy to succeed, all citizens must make a personal commitment to democratic values and actively practice them in their daily lives. Without this commitment, our rights as guaranteed in the law would lose their value, and our society would lose its democratic spirit. The vitality of Canada's democracy depends on all citizens' commitment to our shared democratic values.



Canadian Values and Traditions

Canadian society is based on a set of important values and traditions. Canadians work hard to develop a society that respects these values. They include a respect for cultural differences, equality, liberty and freedom of expression. We will discuss these values in more detail in Chapter 2.

You may be familiar with many of these values and traditions. Others may be new to you. Or if you are an immigrant, perhaps the government in your former country prevented you and your fellow citizens from practicing these values.

Our laws and government programs reflect our traditions and values as a society. If you are a new Canadian, you may find some of our laws and government programs strange. You may even think they are wrong.

But if you are a new citizen, you have a responsibility to understand the values that are reflected in our laws or programs. You also have a responsibility to adjust to Canadian values and our way of life. Canadian citizens have a responsibility to respect Canadian values.

Even after you take time to learn and adjust to Canadian values, you may still find that a law or government program makes it impossible for you and your family to follow your own traditions.

Or you may feel that a law or government program is unfair to you and others because it doesn't reflect Canadian values.

If so, you have a responsibility as a citizen to work to convince other citizens (and our governments) that the law needs to be changed.

This is a major responsibility in Canadian democracy. Our laws and government programs must benefit all Canadians, rather than just a particular group.

Women in Canadian Society

Canadian society considers women as equal to men.

In many societies women are considered inferior to men, particularly in terms of family responsibilities.

Canadian society considers women as equal partners in the family, the business world, and in our public life.

This change has happened quite recently. Canadians are now working hard to make this value of gender equality a reality in all aspects of our society.

Some Canadians, especially men, will need to adjust to this value and learn to respect women as equals.

The Media in Canada

Canada recognizes that the media play a special role in democracy

In some countries, public officials are rarely criticized by citizens or the media. Journalists can risk imprisonment and even torture for criticizing their government.

Canadian media—our newspapers, magazines, radio and television—monitor the actions of governments very closely. They comment on government actions, programs and policies, and frequently criticize public officials.



Their role is to promote government accountability.

Accountability means that citizens have the right to review government actions, as well as the right to demand changes.

Since the media also give close attention to the concerns of citizens, they can play a powerful role in social change.

Should You Worry About Participating in the Democratic Process?

If you are a new Canadian, you might think that it is not wise for you to become involved in political matters. Perhaps you worry that:

- You should not criticize the government, its laws or programs because you might cause trouble for yourself or your family, or might even risk your family's citizenship.
- You do not have the language skills or knowledge about Canada that you need to make a difference.
- You should not criticize the government because you are a new citizen who should be thankful for being accepted into Canada.
- Other Canadians will criticize you for not accepting the way we live here.

If you are new to Canada, it is normal to have these feelings. However, Canadians respect other citizens' rights to speak out and raise concerns, even if they disagree with them. *Freedom of expression* is one of the most important values in our society.

No one can take away you or your family's citizenship just because you are critical of a government or its programs. If someone threatens to do this, there are many groups willing to help you.

As a citizen you have the right and responsibility to participate in democracy.

Four Reasons Not to Worry

If you do have any of these concerns, here are some things to remember:

- ☑ **New Canadians make many important contributions to Canadian society.**

Our nation has been built by new Canadians just like you. You should take pride in that heritage.

- ☑ **Almost all citizens or their ancestors at one time were new Canadians.**

All of us (or our ancestors) came to Canada from somewhere else. Most of us arrived within the last one hundred years. (The important exception to this is our aboriginal peoples.) Coming from another country does not mean that you are a second class Canadian. You are simply a *newer* Canadian.

- ✓ **Politicians are becoming more responsive to the needs of cultural communities.**

Many politicians now try hard to understand the needs and hopes of new Canadians in various cultural communities. Politicians recognize that in a democracy, each person has an equal vote in deciding who forms a government. The vote of a new Canadian is just as important as the vote of a native-born Canadian.

Ethnic communities can help a political party to win an election. Politicians from all political parties understand the voting power of various cultural communities in Canada. They work hard to gain the attention and support from these communities.

- ✓ **You are not alone**

Canada recognizes that new Canadians sometimes need help in adjusting to their new home.

All levels of government and many private organizations offer assistance, such as translation services, to help new Canadians adjust to their home. If you ever feel discouraged from stating your concerns or needs about a government program or law, you can turn to government and private agencies for help and support.

MOSAIC, the Immigrant Services Society of B.C. and SUCCESS are examples of organizations that provide support services for new Canadians.

- ✓ **MOSAIC offers information, oral interpretation, written translation, counseling, cultural orientation, English classes, community outreach, employment preparation, legal advice and advocacy.**



MOSAIC

- ☑ Immigrant Services Society of B.C. provides English conversation classes, cultural orientation classes, family, individual and job counseling, escort-interpretation, and information and referral services.



- ☑ SUCCESS offers a variety of services to all members of the Chinese and multicultural community, including immigrant airport reception, orientation, family and youth counseling advocacy, employment counseling and job training, and citizenship education programs.

Consult your phone book or visit your local community centre or library to learn about other agencies. In the Greater Vancouver area, the *Red Book* published by Information Services lists many multicultural and community-based organizations that provide these services.

Remember, as Canadian citizens, we are free to say what we believe. This is one of our most important freedoms.

Changing Canadian Traditions

Men in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) are now allowed to wear turbans in place of the traditional “Mountie” hat.

This change was very controversial. Many Canadians resisted it. Some believed that it showed “disrespect” for a Canadian tradition.

Citizen groups worked hard to educate Canadians about the religious significance of the turban for Canadians of the Sikh faith.

Because Canada values freedom of religion, federal policies were changed to accommodate Sikh men who become RCMP officers. Most Canadians now accept this as a sensible and fair change in policy.



RCMP Constable Baltej Singh Dhillon (1997)