

## Is it time to close Hotel Canada?

*What responsibilities do dual citizens have, and where should their loyalties lie?*

WILLIAM KAPLAN | Dec 25, 2006

It's a storefront corner office right beside a convenience store, in a west-end Toronto neighbourhood. It is much like constituency offices all over the country. Outside, there's a big sign with the name of the parliamentarian in big letters. Inside, there's always a warm welcome, and a full range of constituency services on offer. But it doesn't take long for even the casual observer to sense that this office is a little different: it belongs to Dr. Gino Bucchino, the Canadian citizen currently sitting in the Italian parliament. Bucchino's constituents are Italian nationals and Italian Canadians. This Toronto member of parliament doesn't fly Rapidair to Ottawa to do his job, but Alitalia to Rome.

If that sounds strange, that's because it is. The Italian government set the wheels in motion for Bucchino's bizarre political career in 2001 when it passed a law giving Italian citizens (who acquire their citizenship by descent) living overseas the right to run as candidates. The same law created the Ministry of Italians Abroad. The Italian diaspora around the world -- some 3.5 million strong -- was divided into quarters, and North and Central America were allocated two seats in the lower house, like our House of Commons, and one in the Senate.

Even before that, some Italian Canadians had been lobbying the Canadian government for the right to run in Italian elections. Ottawa had consistently said no, perhaps because the public face of the idea was octogenarian Mirko Tremaglia, the "Minister of Italians in the World" and unapologetic defender of Benito Mussolini. Or perhaps the federal government gave the idea some considered thought and concluded that allowing Canadians to participate in foreign government was inconsistent with Canadian citizenship -- and something that could lead to serious consequences for this country. Whatever the cause of Ottawa's initial reluctance, the lobbying eventually worked. On Nov. 24, 2005, then-foreign affairs minister Pierre Pettigrew announced that Canada would allow Italian citizens and dual citizens resident in Canada since 1981 to stand as candidates for overseas seats in the next Italian election.

Domestic politics on this side of the Atlantic probably played a part in the announcement. Charles Caccia, a retired Liberal MP who vigorously opposed the move, believes the whole thing was little more than Pettigrew trying to consolidate the Italian Canadian vote in his Montreal riding, and Paul Martin trying to shore up support among Italian Canadian voters. (Of course, it made little difference in the end: the Conservatives won the election, and Pettigrew lost his seat.)

But the Liberals' deathbed conversion to the cause survived the change in government. The first Italian general election after the change in policy took place in April. The Forza Italia (Go Italy!) centre-right party, led by the controversial, pro-American businessman Silvio Berlusconi, was up against the centre-left anti-American L'Unione Prodi, a coalition put together by Romano Prodi, in a close, dynamic race.

Thirty overseas candidates threw their hats into the ring, 11 of them Canadians or Canadian residents. Britain, France and the United States also permitted its citizens to

run. There were seven political parties. While the overseas leftists formed a coalition, those on the right did not -- a decision that would ultimately cost Berlusconi the election. Forty thousand Italians resident in Canada and Italian Canadians sent in their ballots to consulates across the country, which forwarded them to Rome, and when the results were in, Gino Bucchino, a non-practising doctor resident in Toronto since 1988, was elected.

From a Canadian perspective, there was nothing new about foreign citizens living abroad voting in elections at home. Many Americans resident in Canada actively participate in U.S. elections. Citizens of France have, for years, participated in French elections, and many other foreign citizens exercise similar rights. And, of course, Canadians with more than one passport regularly vote in Canadian elections and overseas elections. But this was the first time that a Canadian resident was elected in Canada to represent his constituents, Italians and Italian Canadians, in another parliament in a different country.

Given the slim margin of victory, there is no doubt that overseas Italians determined Italy's political fate. Many, including Berlusconi, weren't happy: "It seems impossible," the Italian newspaper L'Unita editorialized, "but the fate of this 2006 election has been decided by Italian émigrés of the second and third generation rather than by any people in Italy -- by men and women who were not born in their native land and, in the great majority of cases, have never lived there."

The implications, both domestic and foreign, were enormous, and once they began to sink in, they caused palpable concern behind the scenes in Ottawa. According to a secret briefing note prepared for incoming Conservative Heritage Minister Bev Oda, "permission to have persons resident in Canada sit in a foreign (legislature) is unprecedented." The note went on to advise that "the impact of such a practice on the integration of newcomers in an increasingly diverse Canada, which includes more than 200 ethnic groups, will need to be carefully considered."

But strange as it seemed, was this really just a case of the law catching up with practice? After all, Canadians have been sitting in foreign parliaments for a long time, and their numbers are actually increasing.

There are a number of variations on the theme. Conrad Black was required in 2001 to give up his Canadian citizenship to sit in the British House of Lords (along with, incidentally, about a dozen or so dual nationals). However, had his National Post been friendlier to the Chrétien government, the then prime minister would surely not have spuriously invoked the "Nickle Resolution" -- an expired government prohibition of neither factual nor legal significance -- to deprive him of the appointment. This situation is particularly ridiculous: according to a spokesperson for the Immigration Department, "there is nothing in the Citizenship Act or citizenship regulations that prevents the granting or resumption of citizenship to someone who holds a foreign honour or title." So for Conrad Black, who was not allowed to stay a Canadian to become a lord, there is, according to Canadian law, nothing stopping him from remaining a lord and becoming a Canadian.

Vaira Vike-Freiberga, in another example, a former professor at the Université de Montréal, forfeited her Canadian citizenship when she became Latvia's president in 1999. Notably, we did not make her do it; the Latvians did.

But for all the attention accorded those well-known cases, hardly a public word has been uttered about the many members of parliament, the speaker, two cabinet ministers, two deputy ministers and innumerable political staff, all Canadian citizens, sitting, at one time or another, in the Transitional Federal Government Parliament in Baidoa, Somalia, 250 km from the capital, Mogadishu. There is informed speculation that many other Somali parliamentarians are also Canadians. While the president of the transitional government is not a Canadian, his wife, children and grandchildren all hold Canadian citizenship.

This is perhaps not surprising. Many of the best educated people left Somalia after 1991, when brutal dictator Mohammed Siad Barre was overthrown by a coalition of equally murderous warlords. About 100,000 made their way to Canada, the largest diaspora of Somalis outside of Africa. The 2004 formation of a transitional federal government brought a semblance of order to the country, and countless Somali Canadians headed home.

Not all Somali Canadians, however, want the Transitional Federal Government to succeed. It is facing a violent challenge from the Union of Islamic Courts which, with the assistance of one of its leaders -- a former Toronto grocer named Abdullahi Afrah - - has effectively taken over large parts of the country, bringing with it public, Taliban-style executions, press censorship and strict dress codes for women. The pro-Taliban Afrah recently described the leader of his movement, Sheikh Hasan Dahir Aweys -- named a supporter of terrorism by the United Nations -- as "a really very, very nice person."

Somalia is a failed state, and the Transitional Federal Government needs all the help it can get. It is only a matter of time before a full-scale civil war breaks out, with Canadians, in the TFG and the Islamic Courts, front and centre, fighting each other, and with other Canadians, quite possibly being called upon as part of another international effort to save that country, becoming involved-on one side of the conflict.

It wouldn't be the first time that Canadians would be fighting Canadians overseas. Consider the case of Gojko Susak, one of a quarter-million Croats who fled to Canada from the 1960s on. When Franco Tudjman took over the Croatian government in 1990, Susak, a house painter who had lived in Canada for 20 years, went back, and before long was Croatia's minister of defence, presiding over the "ethnic cleansing" of Serbs in the Medak pocket at the same time Canadian soldiers were trying to prevent that slaughter.

These alarming cases are no doubt exceptional -- many Canadians who carry more than one passport have no difficulty reconciling competing claims arising from dual nationality. That was the position first taken by new Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion, who, when initially asked about his French citizenship, flatly rejected giving it up as Michaëlle Jean had when she became Governor General. "I'm born like that. It's part of me. It's my mother who gave that to me. And like all sons, I love my mother and I love what she gave to me. And so to remove that from me, I'd be sad," Dion told TVOntario. Ever the realist, though, he added that if remaining a citizen of France turned into "a liability for our winnability," he would say "non" to France.

Obviously, no one seriously doubts Stéphane Dion's commitment to Canada. And in most cases, there will be no conflict, real or imagined, caused by dual nationality. Recognizing that fact, Ottawa has expressly permitted dual citizenship since 1977. And like it or not, there is probably no practical way of turning the clock back, even if, somehow, a national consensus was reached that it was desirable to do so. The truth is, though, that we actually don't even know how many dual citizens there are living in Canada and how many dual citizens are living overseas. For sure, the numbers are in the millions. And unlike the Americans, who require all of their citizens, no matter where they live, to file an income tax return every year, we do not keep rigorous tabs on hyphenated Canadians.

What is now obvious is that holding a Canadian passport proved particularly beneficial to 15,000 Lebanese Canadians evacuated from Beirut last summer at the cost, to Canadian taxpayers, of some \$94 million. For some of these Canadian citizens, who had not lived in Canada for years, or filed a Canadian income tax return, it was an all-expenses paid trip, not "home," but to a safe haven at Canadian government expense. Within a matter of weeks, 7,000 of these evacuees were said to have returned home -- to their real home, that is. Among the evacuees were Canadians of convenience: men, women and children with no ties whatsoever to this country except a passport. At the same time, many of the evacuees from Lebanon had worked and lived and paid taxes in this country. Some even receive old age pensions after a lifetime of employment in Canada. Were their claims for assistance any more meritorious than those with barely any connection to Canada?

The Lebanese situation provoked all sorts of hand-wringing in Canada. Soon enough, the government announced that dual citizenship was under review and an inter-agency study was announced aimed at setting clear policy guidelines for Canadian political involvement in other countries. This was a good idea. For Canadians, we know that our citizenship is precious. We also know that one of our great contributions to the world is our diversity. So the consequences of burying our heads in the sand about the risks and rewards that come when those two values conflict -- especially in an increasingly globalized world -- potentially put at risk everything we value about Canada.

What if Canadians living abroad started determining the outcome of Canadian elections in the same way that Italians living abroad sent Berlusconi into early retirement? It was, as one critic put it, representation without taxation and without responsibility to boot.

The Conservative government's promised review of dual citizenship meant Citizenship and Immigration, Elections Canada, Foreign Affairs and the Department of Justice were all to be around the table, and a report was promised by the end of the year. That timetable was placed in doubt, however, in late September 2006 when the government, "focusing on the priorities of Canadians," announced millions in spending cuts. Twenty million dollars were axed from funding for "a proposed new citizenship act." Perhaps the government was backing away from a subject that remains a sensitive one: the NDP has called upon the government to abandon its review because it was making dual nationals "nervous." NDP citizenship critic Bill Siksay told the Globe and Mail recently that many immigrants choose Canada "because we have dual citizenship." This comment seems reason enough for a review of the rules -- after all, in the old days, people came to Canada for freedom and opportunity, not because here they could have their cake and eat it too.

Leaving aside the legal basis for doing so -- and the inevitable Charter challenges that would result -- if Ottawa decided to revert to the previous status quo and outlaw dual nationality, what would the benefits be? And what do we do about all those countries in the world that do not allow their citizens to give up their citizenship? As Maher Arar would attest, when he became a Canadian he could not have renounced his Syrian citizenship even if he had wanted to, which he probably did. Whatever the approach, a reflexive reaction to one Middle East crisis one summer will not lead to better citizenship policy.

At the same time, the problem is not going to go away: to cite just one example, there are an estimated 200,000 Canadian passport holders resident in Hong Kong. One cannot even begin to imagine how the Canadian government, woefully short of military assets at home and with absolutely none in that region, would respond to a crisis there when those citizens, like the Canadians in Beirut, demanded assistance -- a problem that would be made worse by the fact that China does not recognize dual nationality and would have no interest whatsoever in any Canadian intervention on our citizens' behalf if, for example, war broke out in the straits of Taiwan or Hong Kong's free market came under Communist attack. The potential for conflict is enormous.

The very value of citizenship means that there are no easy solutions. Russia, for instance, requires its citizens to formally apply to re-enter the country if they have been living away for more than six years. If we had that rule, Michael Ignatieff would have had to get government permission to return home to launch his leadership bid for the Liberals.

Clearly, we need to take the time to think about the whole meaning of citizenship. Canadians are rightly skeptical of royal commissions, but it might be the right vehicle to help redefine Canadian citizenship for a 21st-century world.

And while a careful, sober review of dual citizenship is a good idea, it should not mean throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Canada is and always will be a country open and welcoming to newcomers. Our entire future depends on that. One hopes that at the end of the day, Canadian citizenship really has less to do with legal status than with values. This is an interdependent world. The more Canadians we have who are truly bi- and multicultural, bi- and multilingual, adept at making their way in different cultures and societies, the better off we will be. Even if it were possible to do so -- and it probably isn't -- it is not in Canada's national interest to restrict citizenship. Almost 100 countries in the world permit dual citizenship, including the United States, where citizenship really does matter to most Americans. Excepting murderous thugs like Gojko Susak or Taliban wannabes like Abdullahi Afrah, most Canadian citizens abroad are well placed to promote our values and our democratic institutions.

Latvian President Vike-Freiberga is a case in point. As a frightened seven-year-old, Vike-Freiberga arrived here a refugee from Soviet dictatorship. She spent more than 50 years in Canada, becoming as Canadian as anyone born here, fully integrated into society and a recognized academic leader. As president of Latvia, she has been outspoken on social issues, moral values and democracy. We need more Canadians like her, here and overseas. The issue is not that Vike-Freiberga was a dual national -- after all, she became an outstanding Canadian. The issue is how best do we identify

Canadian values and transmit them to native born and Canadians by choice. We clearly failed in the cases of Gojko Susak and Abdullahi Afrah.

Many other more benign examples demonstrate that there is a lot of reason to believe we are failing to attract and retain the allegiance of Canadians, by birth and by choice, here at home. In some communities, for example, voting in Canadian elections is actively discouraged. Why bother learning about this country, and actively participating in it, if you have another home to return to? Allowing our citizens to hold elected office in other sovereign nations is just the symptom of that problem -- that some Canadians want to sit in the Italian parliament, or help rule and rebuild Somalia, or even leave Canada to "ethnically cleanse" or wage jihad somewhere else shows that not enough of us are dedicated, first and foremost, to the country whose passport we carry. Sending Dr. Bucchino to the Eternal City appears innocent on the surface. Carefully examined, it's a slippery slope, and Canadians need to appreciate that their citizenship is eroding before their eyes.

The problem is not exaggerated and it won't be easily solved, for example, as the minister of foreign affairs suggested, by some sort of dual citizenship tax or, as the C.D. Howe Institute advocates, by a "passport tax," with overseas Canadians paying more to obtain and renew their passports. In early November, Citizenship and Immigration Minister Monte Solberg told a House of Commons committee that the government was considering whether Canadians living abroad should be able to qualify for social programs when they return. "If we're in a situation where somebody's absent, isn't paying taxes but is going to be using our social programs down the road, I think Canadians would feel that is unfair," Solberg told the committee. Liberal MP Jim Karygiannis, predictably, immediately accused Solberg of immigrant bashing. However, what is really needed is more discussion, not less. There is, currently, a backlog of 800,000 immigration applications awaiting processing while the government has announced its intention to increase immigrant quotas to a 25-year high. How these new Canadians are integrated is a matter of national importance, and that means facing, straight on, the challenges of dual nationality.

So the current Canadian government policy on Canadian citizenship is a problem because it reinforces that unsettled feeling that, for some of us, Canada is really just - - as acclaimed novelist Yann Martel famously put it -- a hotel. A fabulous but temporary place to visit, filled with interesting people, many of them staying for a while before heading home, or going somewhere else. Maybe it's time that we all made an effort to turn that hotel into a permanent home -- for everyone lucky enough to be able to call themselves a Canadian.

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