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**Dual Citizenship and Canada's New Diaspora**

**Don J. DeVoretz and Yuen Pau Woo**

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## RIIM

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**Dual Citizenship and Canada's New Diaspora**

by

Don J. DeVoretz  
Co-Director, RIIM

and

Yuen Pau Woo  
Co-CEO, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada

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The recent evacuation of foreign nationals in Lebanon has ignited a debate about Canadians living overseas that is useful in some senses, but also deeply misleading. Most Canadians were surprised to learn that there were as many as 30,000 of their fellow citizens living in Lebanon, most of whom are Lebanese by birth. This realization has drawn attention to the recent work of Kenny Zhang at the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, which puts the total number of Canadians living outside of Canada at around 2.7 million. As in Lebanon, many of these overseas Canadians are recent migrants who have returned to their native countries. The phenomenon of “return migration” or “transnationalism” – previously an arcane term reserved for academic papers and conferences – has been introduced to the public domain.

At the same time, the growing political response to the perceived problems of the Lebanon evacuation has precipitated a debate on dual citizenship that is long on emotion and short on facts. This debate has been framed in terms that pre-judge the value of Canada’s dual citizenship policy and which characterize the new Canadian diaspora (including return migrants) as a liability to Canada.

Canadians living overseas who hold dual citizenship are being characterized as ingrates for their apparent lack of patriotism, possible tax avoidance, and tenuous cultural and political ties to Canada. If any of this is true, why does it apply only to the more recent wave of return migrants and not to an earlier generation of Canadians living in the United States or England, many with dual citizenship?

We believe it has to do with preconceived notions of the cost and benefits that the different generations of the Canadian diaspora return to Canada. On balance, Canadians living in the US are seen to bring honour and pride to the motherland through their successful exploits à la Wayne Gretzky, Robert Mundell, and Jim Carrey. This sense of pride was not diluted by the possibility of our heroes holding two or more passports. Canadians are forgiving of our icons in the US, even when they surrender their prized citizenship. For example, there was much sympathy in the Canadian media for the late Peter Jennings, who proudly based his career on the travel freedom afforded by a Canadian passport, but who felt compelled to become a US citizen after the events of 9/11.

Should we not also cast a similarly positive light on the more recent vintage of foreign-born Canadians living overseas? The implications of the Lebanon evacuation have much less to do with dual citizenship than with the urgent need for a Canadian diaspora strategy that recognizes the transnational reality of modern-day immigration. Under the broader rubric of policies to embrace Canadians living overseas, there may well be a need to revisit our citizenship and naturalization policy, which is one of the most liberal in the world. Even so, any tightening of citizenship requirements has to be weighed against the negative effects on immigration and citizenship ascension.

It is no surprise that the highest rates of return migration are found among skilled workers, which is the “preferred” class of migrants in current immigration policy. The abolition of dual citizenship could well make it more difficult to attract and retain skilled worker immigrants. It could also mean fewer immigrants taking up citizenship. Which is worse: to have large numbers of Canadians living overseas who have little attachment to the country, or to have large numbers of non-Canadians living in the country who don’t take up citizenship because they have an attachment to their native lands?

There are a number of ways in which Canada can enhance the benefits of the new diaspora without abandoning dual citizenship. The starting point should be to create a stronger link between citizenship and political participation by encouraging new immigrants to vote, whether they are resident in Canada or abroad. We should emulate countries such as the US and Italy, which include overseas nationals in their census and actively encourage them to vote in national elections. Encouraging the diaspora to vote is a way of making overseas Canadians feel closer to home and keeping them aware of issues in Canada.

There are also ways of fostering closer economic and cultural links to the Canadian diaspora through taxation, education policy, and the creation of overseas Canadian networks. In the same way that we have come to accept that overseas affiliates of Canadian corporations are net overseas assets that can generate long-term benefits for the country, we need to also count the Canadian diaspora as a long-term asset that has to be cultivated, and not spurned.

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Vancouver Centre of Excellence: Immigration, WMX4653, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University  
Drive, Burnaby, B.C, Canada V5A 1S6. Tel: (604) 291-4575 Fax: (604) 291-5336

E-mail: [riimlib@sfu.ca](mailto:riimlib@sfu.ca)  
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