“We talk about granting new citizenship but we talk about none of its meaning.”—Mavis Gallant

Mavis Gallant’s 1947 article *“Are They Canadians?”* appeared just as the first Canadian Citizenship Act came into force. This legislation marked a formal break from British subjecthood and a symbolic assertion of national identity. Yet Gallant was quick to observe a core contradiction: while legal citizenship was conferred, its meaning—socially, culturally, and emotionally—remained undefined. She cited the case of 1,500 naturalized Yugoslavs who, despite investing in Canadian society, ultimately returned to Europe. “They obviously did not feel they belonged here,” she wrote. “There has never been an organized program to teach immigrants the English language, let alone the rudiments of citizenship.”

More than seventy-five years later, her critique remains salient. Canada’s evolving identity continues to be shaped by shifting geopolitical dynamics—no longer by the British Empire, but increasingly in relation to the United States. In this context, questions about belonging, integration, and national cohesion are as urgent as ever.

Today’s policy frameworks emphasize inclusivity, multiculturalism, and respect for diversity. Yet public discourse often defaults to symbolic gestures rather than substantive engagement with the meaning of citizenship. This risks creating a gap between the formal acquisition of status and the lived experience of belonging—echoing Gallant’s concern.

Complicating the contemporary picture are Indigenous perspectives on identity, citizenship, and sovereignty. These views are foundational to Canada’s history and future but do not fit neatly into conventional narratives of integration. Policymaking in this area must avoid simplistic inclusion and instead recognize the distinctiveness and plurality of Indigenous nationhoods.

Unlike the assimilationist model historically favoured by the United States, Canada’s approach to citizenship remains more open-ended. This is a strength—but only if paired with deliberate policy supports. Citizenship cannot be treated as a one-time legal event. It must be understood as an

ongoing, participatory process grounded in common principles: democratic values, linguistic and civic literacy, Indigenous rights, and the rule of law. These serve as flexible but firm guardrails for fostering a shared sense of purpose.

For policymakers, the challenge is clear: to invest in the infrastructures—educational, social, cultural—that make belonging possible. This means expanding access to civic education, supporting language acquisition, affirming Indigenous jurisdiction, and creating inclusive spaces for plural narratives. Citizenship, in this context, becomes not only a legal designation but a collective, continuous process—one that reflects a nation still defining itself.

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