



**Debbie Douglas - Remarks at International Metropolis 2019**  
**[Plenary: Cities and Migration - Friday, June 28 2019](#)**

**Description:**

Social integration, inevitably, occurs, or is impeded, in local contexts. To an important degree, the potential for integration is related to the nature and degree of interaction between people across diversity (ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic, etc.). Municipal governments and civil society organizations play important roles in shaping this social context. With limited resources, for example, municipalities are expected to address everyday challenges faced by an increasingly diverse newcomer population that includes vulnerable groups such as refugees, children and LGBTQ2+ people. Also, the efforts of non-governmental organizations to support newcomer integration are heavily influenced by the social context. This plenary will explore the critical role of municipalities and local civil society in substantiating the “promise of migration” and in the successful inclusion of newcomers.

**Synopsis:**

In her presentation Debbie Douglas will reflect on the conceptualization of ‘social integration’ and who might be included in that notion. This is a particularly important question in Ontario which continues to be the province of highest refugee and migrant arrivals. It has become more important over the last decade as immigration trends and patterns have shifted towards more immigration of people of colour, and more people with cultural, linguistic and religious or faith traditions that are different from the norm in this settler-colonial society. Canadians have generally been more rather than less tolerant of immigration for the past several decades, however there is a growing backlash against refugees in particular and more generally against immigrants who people of colour and against Muslims.

Debbie will speak to the role of umbrella organizations such as OCASI and relationships with municipal and other governments to advance the goal of social integration. She will also reflect on the critical work done by immigrant and refugee-serving organizations in supporting refugees and migrants to fully realize the promise of migration in the face of systemic barriers and growing social and economic disadvantage.

## **Debbie Douglas – Plenary Remarks**

[Check against delivery]

Good morning. I would like to begin by acknowledging the privilege to speak here on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people.

On June 16, 2019 we read in the media that a majority of Canadians polled – approximately 63% - believed the federal government should limit the number of immigrants to the country. The poll was conducted by Leger between June 7 and 10.

Only 37% believed there should be more immigration to meet Canada's economic needs.

The respondents were randomly recruited from Leger's online panel – which raises questions about whether they represent a random sample of the population (they likely don't).

An earlier poll by Leger in February this year found that half the respondents believed Canada welcomes too many immigrants and refugees.

But what we found most alarming was the expressed preference for white immigration.

An EKOS poll from April 2019 found 42 per cent of Canadians believed too many non-white people were accepted as immigrants to Canada.

Another poll by Ipsos from May 2019 had a similar finding – that 37 per cent of respondents believed non-white immigration was a threat to Canada.

Many think that these findings are par for the course in say the United States, or even in Europe. But not in Canada. However, racism and in particular anti-Black racism and Islamophobia (Muslims are often constructed as racialized) is alive well here in the 'great North'. So the findings of the polls should not be a surprise. Nor should it be seen as some new Canadian attitude.

What was new EKOS reported, is that for the first time since it began its tracking in the 1990's, resentment about the growth of immigration was now blended with resentment about the rate of non-white immigration.

What is also important to note is that the majority of those holding these views were also partial to the Conservative Party, with almost 70% of those identifying as supporters of Canada's federal Conservative Party expressing concern about the increasing number of immigrants from the Global South.

These hardening attitudes are deeply troubling on many levels. Not the least, that Canada will be holding a general federal election on October 21.

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Just last week, after a marathon debate on Sunday June 16, the Quebec government pushed through Bill 21, the so-called secularism law. The law bars public service employees such as teachers, police officers, judges and others from wearing religious symbols such as crucifixes, kippas, turbans and hijabs in the course of their duties.

The Bill took a harder line on a previous government measure – that residents are required to uncover their faces when accessing public services such as public transit, and the legal system.

And the Quebec government then announced it will establish surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms to ensure the Bill is ‘respected’.

The Bill and the enforcement measures were met with a massive public outcry, and different groups continue to protest both.

Among the most outspoken protestors are Muslim women of colour, particularly women that wear the hijab. If there was ever any question whether they are socially integrated, their active participation in organizing and speaking out against the Bill should convince anyone otherwise. Through their actions they have demonstrated they are aware, engaged, and will not hesitate to speak.

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The Quebec government’s version of ‘social integration’ is one of forced secularism, one that comes complete with enforcement mechanisms. It is also one of religious and racial intolerance, since Muslim women are disproportionately affected, and they are also predominantly women of colour.

It was only two years and a half years ago that Quebec Muslims were subject to a terror attack – a mass shooting at the Quebec City Mosque that left six worshippers killed and nineteen others injured.

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Canada generally prides itself on acknowledging that integration is a two-way process, where individuals and groups can be full participants in Canadian society while retaining their own cultural identity – unlike the United States which uses the language of ‘assimilation’.

The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act states as an objective, “to promote the successful integration of permanent residents into Canada, while recognizing that integration involves mutual obligations for new immigrants and Canadian society;”

To facilitate the process, the federal government invests in settlement services including free language training to support new arrivals – or at least the sanctioned ones – to settle and integrate.

The support is helped along by rules that mandate fluency in one of the two official languages in order to gain residency or Citizenship – the steel in the velvet glove. “Yes integration is a two-way process, but done our way”.

The Department of Canadian Heritage, which is tasked with the implementation of the Multiculturalism Act, sees its role as promoting and celebrating an inclusive society.

But as those using a critical analysis have pointed out, Canada’s discourse on immigration and multiculturalism is one of compliance and conformity.

That ultimately it is an exhortation to ‘become more like us’ without quite defining the ‘us’. And in case I’m not being clear on where I stand, this exhortation to ‘become more like us’ are neither possible nor even desirable.

Witness the invoking of ‘Canadian culture’ and ‘Canadian values’ – whatever they might be - by certain media organizations and certain politicians, from time to time over the last several decades – typically to demonize people of colour; to express thinly-veiled racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia.

Isn’t it time to change the channel on that tired old conversation about ‘Canadian values’? When do we start talking about learning the Algonquin language; learning about Anishnaabe culture – and the different languages and cultures of the First Peoples as an act of reconciliation as well as truly promoting and celebrating an inclusive society?

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If social integration is intended to leave everyone with a sense of belonging and a full participant in society, we can clearly see that it is not playing out so well, even over several generations. We see that economic integration is a critical factor in achieving social integration.

The United Way of Greater Toronto reflected in a recent report, “*Rebalancing the Opportunity Equation*”, that “our social foundations are weakened when the opportunity equation is compromised”. The report examined Census data for Toronto and spoke of the widening and deepening of income inequality along racial and gender lines – confirming what many of us have been talking about for the last two decades and more – that the intersections of racial and ethnic identity and gender are more likely to determine opportunity, rather than attainment in education, skills or credentials.

Census data confirms that racial inequality is not evenly distributed. Black people and people of African origin are over-represented in economic disadvantage – even among

those who are highly educated and credentialed; and even over multiple generations. People of Korean origin also experience disproportionate disadvantage.

Statistics Canada's General Social Survey confirms that while the second and third generation of immigrants are better integrated, there are differences in how they are treated and their access to economic opportunity.

Race and ethnicity are significant factors that affect cultural and civic integration – but people of different ethnicities fare differently. There are many different studies that confirm the existence of racial bias in hiring. A 2017 study found that job seekers with Asian names are frequently screened out.

Is the idea of social integration even attainable? Rather than attempting to 'fix the immigrant' should we not call on governments to put their resources into addressing systemic barriers through better legislation and policies, and a more equitable Budget? A budget that not only centres gender as our federal government has been proactive in doing, but one that also recognizes the importance centring race.

Shouldn't immigrants have a say in defining social integration, and the kind of systemic change that is needed to create equitable opportunities? Shouldn't the organizations that work on the frontlines with immigrant communities towards that goal – organizations like OCASI member agencies? Wouldn't that bring Canada closer to the imagined ideal of integration as a two-way process?

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Various municipal governments in Canada have started to move in that direction.

Cities can certainly look at themselves as a corporation and put into place measures like employment equity, and privilege those who have historically been excluded when they hire – giving priority those who are most disadvantaged in that jurisdiction.

They can explore using mechanisms such as paid internships and mentorship of immigrants, contract compliance with their vendors to push forward progressive hiring and retention policies, and social procurement policies.

The Toronto Community Benefits Network is certainly an initiative to watch as it strengthens its relationship with organized labour and advocate with governments to put the necessary policies in place.

There are other opportunities for City governments to proactively facilitate social, economic and political integration and that is by adopting motions in favour of allowing permanent residents to vote in municipal election – something that is already in place in several cities around the world.

The City of Toronto was the first municipality in Canada to vote in favour of such a motion.

Other Ontario municipalities soon followed including North Bay and Hamilton. Outside Ontario, Vancouver on our west coast and Calgary on the Prairies have also adopted a motion to extend the municipal vote to permanent residents.

Civil society organizations like OCASI and our member agencies have engaged with other municipalities where possible, to encourage the adoption of a similar motion. A promising movement emerged a few years ago, but seems to have stalled for lack of momentum.

Advocacy around the franchise for non-citizens must be two-fold and provinces must also be lobbied as cities are the creations of provinces and we would need the provincial governments on board to make a change to provincial legislation. This is a good example of how cities are willing to do the heavy lifting, to be proactive on immigrant and refugee integration and inclusion but are impeded.

The City of Toronto can claim another first, of adopting an Access Without Fear – or a ‘Sanctuary city’ motion – to allow all residents to access all city services without regard to immigration status.

Much work needs to be done – especially where provincial rules limit access to resources like social housing and other services, but the City of Toronto has come a long way in making fully-city owned and controlled services accessible to everyone.

Except in one critical area: Police services.

The Police will not budge from their position that they have a duty to report people without immigration status– which can typically result in a Canada Border Services apprehension, detention and deportation.

This is of great concern to us – particularly when it comes to the safety and security of women with precarious immigration status who are facing domestic violence, migrant workers who are out of status and vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

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Cities and civil society organizations have collaborated on shifting the public discourse on immigration, here in Canada and in many other places around the world.

OCASI worked with the City of Toronto with pro-bono support from private sector public relations and communication partners on a highly impactful anti-Islamophobia poster campaign, and another one on anti-Black racism. The City then partnered with other collaborators on a campaign to shift the narrative on Transgender and gender non-binary persons.

But now we confront a new challenge here in Ontario with our present provincial government which has curtailed the use of provincial funding for refugee and immigration legal services.

Access to justice is a fundamental right. The cost WILL show up somewhere else and cities must bear the burden of higher orders of government abdicating their role. Despite the fact that they do not have the revenue generation tools they need to raise the needed funds.

As civil society organizations we have a vested interest in ensuring our cities are strong and progressive. This is where immigrant settlement and integration happens after all – at the local level – and where we need to work together to create spaces and places where the promise of migration will be realized for immigrants and refugees and for the cities.

I leave you with these two short OCASI-City of Toronto Anti-Islamophobia Ads.

[Break The Behaviour – Students](#)

[Break The Behaviour - Family](#)