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Welcome: Members of the Ongcol family take the oath of citizenship at Canada Place on July 1, 2006.

The way we are

Canada is a world leader in the great experiment of immigration and citizenship, yet we show little curiosity about how this talent works and how we can improve it

Countries don't spend much time thinking about each other. Unless, of course, they have a serious disagreement. Or want something — oil, for example.

Most countries disappear from the consciousness of the rest of the world most of the time. That's not necessarily a bad thing.

People who don't know you tend to talk about you only when something goes wrong; when you are starving or drowning or being blown up, or when your country is falling apart.

And yet. And yet international affairs matter. We do need to help, to confront international problems, to sell and to buy. To do any of that well we need to have an accurate sense of these other places. And we need to project an accurate sense of ourselves.

Middle-sized countries like Canada, France and Britain are lucky to grab the attention of the world on one or two issues. More powerful countries like Germany and Japan do no better. And most countries do a terrible job at projecting themselves.

Both France and Britain have gotten themselves stuck with a romantic, old-fashioned, tourism-oriented image that contradicts their realities.

As for Canada, we continue to present ourselves at the international level as an outcome of the British, French, indeed European, and increasingly American experiences. This sends the message that we are a derivative society, new, without originality or historical and political depth.

And so here we are, arguably the oldest continuous democratic federation in the world, a stable and highly experienced civilization.

Yet apart from a few stock phrases on multiculturalism, most of our public discussion leads us back to outdated European models famous for centralized, monolithic, monocultural approaches and away from how we have become the leading model for non-monolithic, decentralized, multilingual, culturally complex societies.

And that is my point. Canada gets very few kicks at the can of world interest, understanding and influence. Is there anything about us which really does interest the

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rest of the world? Yes. One thing.

People everywhere are fascinated by our non-derivative experiment: 250,000 new citizens sworn in every year; people chosen from the widest possible range of countries; our expectation that these immigrants will become citizens within about four years; our assumption that new Canadians will take up the full range of citizen duties as fast as possible.

By every international per capita measurement of immigration and citizenship, we are No. 1 in the world. We are not a few percentage points ahead, but two, three, four times further out on the cutting edge than anyone else.

And it is all going reasonably well. There is a national consensus in favour. People from around the world come to look; some to learn, some convinced that they will find signs of imminent catastrophe.

Meanwhile, we roll on, scarcely conscious of the originality of our civilization, apparently not curious about how we do it, about why it works, about whether it could go wrong, about what we must do to ensure it goes ever more right.

Two conclusions come to mind.

First, our easy self-confidence is an illustration of how old and stable this society is. In spite of our periodic errors and horrors along the way — our residential schools, head taxes, expulsions, exclusions, seizures — we have been able to build a non-monolithic society because we began as a non-monolithic society.

For centuries we have been making our way from the original complexity of our aboriginal, francophone, anglophone foundations, step by complicated step to something which is the precise opposite of the Anglo-European-American model of monolithic citizenship. And that is original and fascinating.

The second conclusion — which doesn't contradict the first — is

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that we are intellectually lazy, with little curiosity about how our talent for cultural experimentation works.

There are wonderful volunteer groups, civil servants, institutes and foundations devoting themselves to all of this; questioning, working, helping.

As a nation we celebrate what we have accomplished. Rightly. And yet, as a people, as a country, we rarely pause to examine what we are doing and how we could do better. There is no great public discussion. The result?

While we swear in 250,000 citizens a year, we continually undermine them by tightening the financial strings on second-language education. We save short-term money by making courses essential to new citizens optional in our schools.

We encourage foreign professionals to come, then let our professional bodies tinker with credential systems to protect themselves by marginalizing the newcomers.

We do little to help urban Canadians understand the rest of the country. We do nothing to develop understanding between the First Peoples and new Canadians.

Countries are not magic. To ensure that our experiment really functions and flowers in the long run, we must work at it in a conscious and broad national public way.

Civilizations are intentional. Highly original civilizations like ours require a consciously applied intentionality which we as a country have not yet embraced.

John Ralston Saul is co-chair of the LaFontaine-Baldwin Symposium.