

Take pride that Parliament reflects the face of Canada

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"Because it's 2015," was Justin Trudeau's memorable response to a reporter's question about why he had made it a priority to have gender parity in his cabinet. The composition of the 42nd Parliament suggests that Canadians agree with their new Prime Minister that as one of the world's most diverse countries approaches its 150th birthday, the identities of its political representatives should match the identities of its population.

A look at the composition of the 42nd Parliament is illuminating. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, about one in five Canadians (21 per cent) were born outside the country. In the last parliament, 13 per cent of the legislature (42 MPs) was foreign-born. In the current parliament, in the current parliament there are 45 foreign-born MPs in the enlarged 338 seat House of Commons, the same proportion as before.

Another more significant measure of the successful integration of our diverse population into our polity is the representation of visible minorities in Parliament. (Aboriginal peoples, 4 per cent of our population, are not classified as visible minorities by Statistics Canada.) In contrast to the foreign-born, the number and percentage of visible-minority MPs has risen dramatically: to 47 MPs or 14 per cent of the House. This proportion is almost the same as the proportion of Canadian citizens who are visible minorities (15 per cent).

As well, 14 per cent of all candidates in the recent federal election were visible minorities, suggesting that these would-be MPs were nominated by parties at a rate commensurate with their presence in the population, and that they met electoral success at a rate proportional to their participation (that is, they were not disproportionately elected or defeated). And the October election also saw an unprecedented 10 aboriginal members elected to Parliament, almost at parity with their proportion of the population. The 45 foreign-born MPs come from everywhere: 16 from Asia, 10 from Europe, eight from the Middle East, six from the Americas, five from Africa. In relation to their share of the population, South Asian, West Asian and Arab-Canadians are overrepresented, while Chinese, black, Latin American and Southeast Asian Canadians are underrepresented.

Some people assume that if members of minority groups are elected, they are elected in enclaves where voters are mainly from their own group. While in-group affinity (in all groups) likely plays a role in voters' assessments of candidates, election results suggest that most of the visible-minority MPs were elected in ridings where their own groups did not constitute a majority. Indeed, nine of the 47 visible minority MPs were elected in ridings where the voting population was less than a 20-per-cent visible minority.

Our Parliament is notably more aligned with its population than are the legislatures of other countries with high immigration rates. In the United States, 12 per cent of the population is foreign-born, but only 3 per cent of legislators in Washington are. In Australia, where 28 per cent of the population is foreign-born, only 9 per cent of MPs are.

During the election campaign, many Canadians were dismayed to see a political party peddle suspicion of a minority religious group, as the Conservative government was perceived to be doing with its efforts to prevent a woman from wearing a *niqab* while taking the oath of citizenship. Canada is not free of injustice or prejudice, but it has been remarkable in the extent to which xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments have been absent from mainstream political discourse; the recent election was a striking departure.

Because of this traditional, general rejection of explicit xenophobia across all parties – and because immigrants, like other Canadians, are diverse in their political views – no party has had a monopoly on immigrants and none can take for granted the support of any ethnocultural or religious group. While the Liberals made more of an effort to recruit visible-minority candidates, foreign-born and visible-minority candidates and MPs are present in all major parties, although their numbers swung dramatically in the recent election (along with the fortunes of the parties more broadly).

The Conservatives dropped to six visible-minority MPs in the current Parliament, from 15 previously, and the New Democrats sank to two from 12. The Liberals, meanwhile, jumped from two to 39. The Green Party remains 100-per-cent foreign-born: its only MP and leader Elizabeth May was, like Bruce Springsteen, born in the USA.

So what is new about the 42nd Parliament, aside from altered partisan composition and a gender-balanced cabinet? In fact, not too much, considering that the previous Parliament was quite diverse. But the Liberal government is doing more to make diversity – and an aspirational vision of an inclusive Canada – central to its agenda, and there is no doubt that some of the energy that came out against the Conservative government during the election campaign was a renunciation of tactics that pitted Canadians against each other along ethnic and religious lines.

So when it comes to the composition of the legislature itself, the 42nd Parliament is not so much a watershed as it is one more significant, if incremental, step in a long move toward a national legislature that represents the identities, experiences and perspectives of all Canadians.

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