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Could Canada be smarter about how it treats Canadian expats?

A new report highlights how Canada lacks a strategy for Canadians living abroad. Could Canadian expats be reframed from liabilities to assets?



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Despite living in Thailand for a decade, Frances Watthanaya tries to stay closely connected to Canada.

She receives a newsletter from the CBC each morning. She listens to CBC's evening news show, *Your World at Six*, as often as possible. She has a Canadian address and

pays Canadian taxes on the income she earns as a proofreader for subtitles on Thai TV shows.

But she wishes Canada did more to connect with people like her: Canadian expats.

A new [report](#) echoes her sentiments. The report, commissioned by Independent Senator Yuen Pau Woo, says there is not a lot of information about Canadians living abroad and their experiences — even though expat Canadians are able to vote in federal elections and, in some cases, may still be eligible for provincial health-care coverage.

“From consular services, to health care, taxation and community building, the diaspora has been largely left to its own devices,” the report says. “Perhaps the most glaring example of this oversight has been the complete absence of an official government strategy towards Canadian expats.”

“I just have always kind of felt like I’m on my own,” Watthanaya said. She lives about a four-hour drive from Bangkok and the Canadian embassy. “I don’t know if average people, myself included, even know what our embassies are supposed to do for us,” she said.

It would be helpful if the embassy hosted regular events for Canadian expats to meet each other or sent out a newsletter. She still thinks of Canada as her home and wants to meet more Canadians living in Thailand.

“The longer I’m away, the harder it is,” she said. “You kind of feel like you’re living in two worlds.”

Watthanaya first moved to Thailand in 2006. She was 19 and wanted to improve her Muay Thai martial arts fighting skills. She met her now-husband, who was from a Thai village. In 2008, the couple moved to British Columbia, Watthanaya’s home province, where Watthanaya attended university. Their daughter, now 14, was born there and is a Canadian citizen. Her husband also has Canadian citizenship now. The family returned to Thailand in 2014.

Since the pandemic, communicating with the embassy has been nearly impossible. In early December 2022, Watthanaya contacted officials there to renew her

daughter's passport so she could spend her summer school break — March and April — with her grandmother in B.C. Her emails to the embassy went unanswered until Feb. 27, 2023. By then, the cost of flights had increased too much, and the trip was postponed until October.

“For an expat, your passport is your lifeline,” said Watthanaya. The difficulty of contacting the embassy “left a very bad taste in my mouth,” she said.

Negative impressions

Many Canadians have negative impressions about Canadians living abroad and think they are disloyal or use government services without contributing to Canada, Woo said shortly after the report he commissioned was released last month.

“I’m trying to reframe the conversation,” the B.C. Senator said. Helping Canadian expats evacuate conflict areas or get passports and visas is important, he says. “But if we only think of them as contingent liabilities, then that’s exactly what they will be for the country.

“But if we reframe them, not just as a liability on the balance sheet, but also as assets, then we’ve got a fuller picture of how they can generate good things for this country.”

“Our knowledge about Canadian citizens who currently live abroad, either temporarily or permanently, is quite limited,” the report says. “Unlike countries where emigration is part of the national discourse, like in Ireland or Portugal, Canadians seldom think about their fellow citizens moving to other parts of the world.”

When Canadians do think about Canadian expats, the report says, they often view them in two ways: people who the government helps evacuate during emergency situations and celebrities whose artistic or athletic accomplishments are celebrated.

Evacuees and celebrities “make up a very small subset of the overall diaspora population; for most Canadians abroad, the day-to-day experiences and challenges look quite different and should be explored in relation to the government policies that shape them,” the report says.

According to the report, about four million Canadians live abroad — equal to about 11 per cent of the country's population. The average age is 46. Many live abroad for better work opportunities.

Understanding why Canadians move abroad is important to understand labour shortages in Canada, says Parisa Mahboubi, a senior researcher at the C.D. Howe institute who has studied Canadians living abroad. When skilled professionals move away, it can contribute to labour shortages in Canada, she says.

According to the study Woo commissioned, in 2017, 66 per cent of Canadians who lived abroad lived in the US. In her research, Mahboubi found that Canadian expats in America are usually highly educated, often holding degrees in biology, engineering, computer science or nursing.

Working in the US can be very convenient, says Mithra Saunders, who moved with his wife and daughter to Florida from Toronto in 2021. He and his wife can work remotely — which means they often work on the beach.

“Our business structures are very similar,” he says, comparing working in Canada to working in the US. “We have the same kind of legal system.” He lives in the same time zone as Toronto which makes it easier as well.

Saunders says he sees more Canadians moving to the States. He started a [Facebook group](#) for Canadians moving to Florida, and the US in general, after he moved. After just two years, it has more than 40,000 members.

Small fraction

“You don't lose your connection to your home country even though you're not there,” said Richard Nimijean, a Canadian Studies professor at Carleton University. Nimijean recently moved to Washington, D.C. after spending eight years living in Switzerland where he taught for Carleton online.

One of the main points of connection can be federal elections. In 2019, the Supreme Court of Canada [ruled](#) that Canadian expats are able to cast ballots in federal elections. Before this ruling, Canadians lost that right after five years living abroad.

Woo says that only Canadian expats who pay attention to federal politics are likely to vote in Canadian elections.

“A very small fraction of Canadians abroad vote,” said Woo. About 27,000 Canadian expats [voted](#) in the 2021 federal election, Elections Canada said in a news release shortly after the election.

More Canadian expats should vote, he says. Canadian policies, such as tax or immigration policy, do impact them.

“We should encourage engagement in Canada’s democratic system. It’s their right,” Woo said. “It’s a way for them to stay connected with Canada in a way that can help Canada and in a way that helps themselves if and when they choose to come back.”

People’s understanding of Canada may change when they live abroad, Nimijean says.

In Thailand, Frances Watthanaya says she was not able to figure out how to vote in Canadian federal elections. But she wants to, she says.

“I appreciate Canada so much more having lived abroad,” she said, noting how Canada’s government is more stable than the Thai government. “I sometimes wish that Canadians in Canada would also appreciate Canada and be more proactive citizens.”