
BACKGROUNDER

Backgrounder

Canadians United Against Modern Exclusion

What is modern exclusion?

In an age of heightened geopolitical conflict and populist nationalism, there has been a dangerous turn in many countries to punish their citizens for not conforming to a rigid idea of the national interest or for having benign ties with foreign entities. Canadians from all walks of life have been discriminated against and stigmatized. This is modern exclusion.

While much of the discrimination is informal, diffuse, and sometimes difficult to pin down, the consequences of such actions are not trivial. Individual and organizations caught up in accusations of “foreign interference” or “foreign influence” can face ostracization, stigmatization, and even criminal prosecution. Canadians from all walks of life – businesspeople, scholars, civil servants, community service workers and more – have been affected.

Politicians have exacerbated the problem by not challenging spurious or unsubstantiated claims of foreign interference, often propagated in the media by self-interested agents. The Parliament of Canada passed a draconian national security bill (C-70) in June 2024, which creates a new offence of interfering in a political process on behalf of a foreign entity. While it is not illegal under the bill to be involved in a political process on behalf of a foreign entity as such, it is a criminal offence to do so “covertly”. Anyone who is deemed to be “in association with” a foreign entity and who does not formally submit to a “foreign influence transparency registry” could be seen as acting “covertly” and charged under this offence, for which the maximum penalty is life imprisonment.

A history of exclusion in Canada

Government-sanctioned exclusion of minorities from society has been an unfortunate feature of our history. These odious acts have always been justified on the grounds of racial superiority, national security, public safety, or national interest. First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples are the first and most prominent examples of Canadian exclusion. They were in effect excluded from their own lands and way of life through a system of settler colonialism and exploitation. Their struggle for justice and reconciliation continues to this day.

Immigrants to Canada have been victims of a different kind of exclusion, where earlier generations of settlers have imposed discriminatory policies against the newer arrivals based on racist or xenophobic arguments, with the blessing of government.

There are many examples of immigrant group exclusion in Canadian history. Black Canadians, who arrived as early as the 17th century, have faced racism, discrimination, segregation, and hate because of the colour of their skin. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Canadian government implemented policies to exclude Black people from immigrating to Canada. Around the same time, Doukhobors fleeing Russia faced persecution and stigmatization after arriving in Canada, including the apprehension of children and their placement in institutions. During World War I, Ukrainians in Canada were interned because they were considered "enemy aliens" under the War Measures Act. In 1914, Sikhs fleeing persecution in India arrived in Vancouver aboard the Komagatu Maru seeking sanctuary but were denied entry and eventually deported.

During the Second World War, 31,000 Italian Canadians were labelled "enemy aliens", with over 700 arrested and sent to internment camps. Japanese Canadians fared even worse. More than 20,000 were dispossessed, removed from their homes, and sent to internment camps. Jewish immigration to Canada was also tainted by racism and prejudice, with only 5000 Jewish refugees allowed to enter Canada during the 12-year period of the German Nazi regime. The Minister in charge of immigration policies in Canada during World War II famously said of Jewish immigration that "none is too many". His view was echoed by the Prime Minister of the day, William Lyon Mackenzie King, who saw the acceptance of large numbers of Jewish immigrants as a threat to Canadian society. Nine hundred Jewish refugees aboard the MS St. Louis were denied entry into Canada in 1939 because of such prejudice. Many of them returned to Europe and perished in the Holocaust.

More recently, a special form of "exclusion" has harmed Muslim Canadians, especially in the wake of the American response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Muslims have been subject to excessive security screening, and have faced hate speech, physical abuse, discrimination, and stigmatization in their professional and personal lives. The problem of "Islamophobia" persists to this day, with a particular

variant of it affecting Palestinian Canadians, who have been unfairly tagged as rioters and national security threats because of their support for a just settlement to the conflict in Gaza and the West Bank.

While all the examples above are cases of Canadian exclusion, the word “exclusion” itself is most closely associated with the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, which has been dubbed the “Chinese Exclusion Act”. Following unsuccessful attempts to stem the inflow of Chinese workers to Canada through a punitive “head tax” over a 40-year period, the government of Mackenzie King enacted a law that effectively banned immigration of Chinese people to Canada. The law also required all Chinese in Canada to register with the government and to carry documentation with them, failing which they could be subject to fines, jail, or deportation. The Chinese Exclusion Act was in effect for 24 years.

Immigrant “exclusion”, therefore, is a blemish on Canadian history and continues to be a problem today. While it is unlikely that the Canadian government will return to a blanket ban on immigration of a particular group, such as in the Chinese Exclusion Act, the same types of racist, xenophobic, and national security/national interest arguments are being used to justify modern forms of exclusion.

Modern exclusion today

New forms of exclusion directed at Chinese Canadians and Canadians with links to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are becoming accepted as social and political norms. This modern “Sinophobia” does not target all Chinese in Canada but seeks to categorize Chinese Canadians into those who are acceptable and those who aren’t. In this sense, it is not only a modern version of “exclusion” but also a new kind of racism – one that is both more subtle and more dangerous. The weaponization of foreign interference fears has fostered suspicions about Chinese Canadians and others based on little more than rumours, innuendo, and prejudice. The presumption of disloyalty among Canadians who are involved in improving relations with the PRC or who simply do not accept prevailing narratives about a "China Threat" has resulted in stigmatization, with adverse consequences for their personal lives and careers.

External pressure, groupthink, and domestic politics have entrenched some of these prejudices into policy and law, such as Bill C-70. Police and national security and intelligence agencies, acting on cues from the political class and on their own biases, are suppressing the basic rights and freedoms of Canadians on the grounds of national security. It is a malaise that affects many visible minority groups, but Chinese Canadians and Canadians with ties to the PRC face a unique set of challenges today and in the foreseeable future because of the geopolitical conflict between the United States and China.

While contemporary geopolitics has made Canadians with ties to the PRC especially vulnerable to exclusion today, the problem could in the future apply to other nationality/ethnic groups due to shifts in international relations and power politics. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms should not be

compromised because of shifting winds – whichever way the winds blow.