

By Chelsea Perry

### What Being a Canadian Citizen Means to Me

Quite frankly, prior to writing this essay, I had never really taken the time to evaluate why my Canadian citizenship meant so much to me. If you had asked me, I probably would have rambled off a list of rights and privileges which Canadians have been granted: free health care, access to public education, freedom to move and seek employment within the country, freedom to worship in our own way, and protection against unlawful detainment. All of these are indeed wonderful, and some extend to only a few countries other than our own, which certainly should raise the value in our own eyes. However, what really has been on my mind as of late, particularly as a woman on the brink of eighteen who will soon be able to vote in provincial and federal elections, is how far this country has come in terms of women's involvement in politics. This year, we are celebrating not only the 150th birthday of our country, but also the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. Of course, at the time, this did not extend to all women, as Indigenous women had to wait until 1960 to take part in electing our leaders. However, 1917 marked the beginning of a new era, in which half of Canada's population was finally given recognition as citizens of this country for their ongoing contributions to our society.

I recently came across a TED talk by Jennifer Vollmann in which she outlines the work she did in Kenya, particularly in training and empowering to become more involved in their local government. In that particular region, women having a say in politics was simply unheard of. It just wasn't done. As a recent poly-sci grad, Jennifer took it upon herself to help these women run for parliament. She had the best of intentions, passion, and a well-rounded education education beneath her belt. She began hosting events for the local women, and trained them in civic engagement, voting, and helped them manage their campaigns. Soon, six months had passed since Jennifer had set foot in Kenya, and she called together a meeting with these budding female politicians to ask them about the challenges they were facing in their careers. To her horror, the women began describing the harassment they were experiencing. They were receiving death threats. The lives of their children were being threatened. The problem of lack of women leaders in that particular country was not simply due to a lack of education on the topic, but an entirely different mindset on the role of women in society, which is something that takes quite a long time to change.

This hit me hard. Yes, there is still a mass gender gap in many of our provincial legislatures, but on a federal level. I am in awe of how far we have come as a country. When I speak of desiring to pursue a career in politics, yes, I've been on the receiving end of silly "women in the kitchen" jokes, but I have never felt the fear associated with having my very life or the lives of my family being threatened because I want to help improve my country as a politician or policy analyst. The idea that women like myself are able to attend events such as Rotary AIC as an equal with my male counterparts without fear is something so beautiful to me, and that, simply put, is what my Canadian citizenship means to me. It is the ability to work for the good of my country in freedom and without fear. That, I believe, is something worth celebrating.