

Global Immigration alert

June 2024

Canada

Government of Canada introduces legislation for citizenship by descent

Executive summary

The Honourable Marc Miller, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship (IRCC), has proposed legislation, referred to as Bill C-71, an Act to amend the Citizenship Act (2024) (Bill C-71) that would extend Canadian citizenship by descent beyond the first generation in a manner that is intended by the government to be both inclusive, while still safeguarding the integrity of Canadian citizenship.

Bill C-71 is also designed to reinstate citizenship for “Lost Canadians”—individuals who either lost their Canadian citizenship or were never able to acquire it due to citizenship laws previously in place.

Background

With extremely rare exception, anyone born in Canada is a Canadian citizen upon birth, and the proposed change in Bill C-71 will not alter this in any way. Instead, the proposed legislative change is intended to address citizenship by descent for a person who is born outside of Canada. The current Citizenship Act includes a limitation that restricts citizenship by descent to the first generation. This means that a Canadian citizen can only transfer citizenship to their children born overseas if the parent was either born in Canada or had obtained Canadian citizenship through naturalization before the birth of the child. Canadians who were born or naturalized in Canada have the option to seek a direct grant of citizenship for their adopted children born abroad.

Because of this first-generation restriction, Canadian citizens who were born outside of Canada do not have the ability to

pass on citizenship to their children if they were also born abroad. Additionally, these Canadian citizens are not permitted to request a direct grant of citizenship for a child who was born and adopted outside of Canada.

Furthermore, under the previous section 8 of the Citizenship Act, certain individuals lost their citizenship when they reached the age of 28, referred to as Lost Canadians. This typically affected those born to Canadian parents abroad as the second generation from 15 February 1977 to 16 April 1981, who reached the age of 28 prior to the establishment of the first-generation limit in 2009.

Some legislative revisions in 2009 and 2015 resolved many of these cases by enabling individuals to either acquire Canadian citizenship or reclaim the citizenship they had lost. However, there remain some situations where so-called “Lost Canadians” exist, and these proposed legislative changes are meant to address this.

Key developments

- On 19 December 2023, the Ontario Superior Court of Justice ruled that the first-generation limit on citizenship by descent was unconstitutional. This limit generally restricted the right to pass on Canadian citizenship to children born abroad to Canadian parents to just the first generation, albeit with certain exceptions. The Government of Canada chose not to appeal this decision, and acknowledged the unfairness of the first-generation limit.

- ▶ On 23 May 2024, the Honourable Marc Miller proposed Bill C-71 which is intended by the government to make the citizenship process fairer and more transparent. Bill C-71 would:
 - ▶ Automatically grant Canadian citizenship to children born or adopted abroad by Canadian parents to receive a direct grant of citizenship, beyond the first-generation limit. Once the legislation is enacted, Canadian parents born abroad must have lived in Canada for a total of 1,095 days before the birth or adoption of their child to pass on citizenship.
 - ▶ Restore citizenship to any remaining 'Lost Canadians', their descendants and anyone who was born abroad to a Canadian parent in the second or subsequent generations before the legislation comes into force. This includes people who lost their citizenship because of requirements under the former section 8 of the Citizenship Act.

What's next?

The Minister indicated that further details would be forthcoming upon the Bill's passage through Parliament and its subsequent Royal Assent. As Parliament does not sit during the summer break, it is anticipated that Bill C-71 will not be voted on until later in 2024.

Individuals potentially affected by the proposed amendments in Bill C-71 are likely to seek clarity on the implications for themselves and their relatives. Should the Bill be ratified by Parliament and receive Royal Assent, the Canadian immigration authorities intend to expedite the implementation of these changes. IRCC will also update the Canadian immigration website with more detailed information for those who are eligible.

Key steps

EY will continue to monitor these developments. Should you have any questions, we encourage you to contact one of our immigration professionals.

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