

**Op Ed – Extending municipal voting rights to permanent residents**  
**By Mayor Mike Savage**  
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What Halifax and Nova Scotia need more than anything else is people: to live here, work here, study here and to invest here. I think we also need them to vote here.

With the important exception of Mi'kmaq contributions, ours is a city shaped by the hard work of immigrants. From those first early settlers, to home children and war brides, to waves of people over generations fleeing conflict or seeking better opportunities for their families, we have a built today's Halifax.

This city is home to Pier 21 where one million immigrants landed between 1928 and 1971, too many of whom quickly headed to more populous cities to our west.

But these are different times, and our city is blessed with new opportunities, while many parts of our province face economic challenges.

As we look to embark on the urgent action called for by the Ivany Commission we know that we must find new ways to stem the province-wide population decline by attracting new people to our shores.

Giving more newcomers a voice at the local level may be one tangible way to help us attract and retain the 7,000 new immigrants a year Ray Ivany and company say we need.

On Tuesday, Aug. 5 Halifax Regional Council will be asked to pass a motion that would see the city seek legislative amendments to give

immigrants with permanent residence status the right to vote in our next municipal election.

If my Council colleagues will endorse the idea and if the Provincial Government agrees, we could be opening the polls to thousands more Halifax residents in 2016. I hope this initiative finds support at Province House and from my municipal counterparts throughout Nova Scotia.

According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 15,245 permanent residents are making their home in Nova Scotia, with about 75 percent of them living in Halifax.

Municipal voting rules are not static. They have evolved over time to include women, First Nations people, and those who do not own property. The history of voting rights is about removing arbitrary restrictions on who can vote.

Whether you were born in Halifax or came here from another land, municipal government impacts your life. At the city we are rightly responsible for serving everyone who lives within our boundaries, and the people who choose to live here should have a say in the affairs of their city.

Under the Elections Act, a person is not eligible to vote until he or she has obtained Canadian Citizenship, which can only be applied for after three years of residency. Add to that the processing times of 18 months to two years and throw in the four-year municipal election cycle, and it could take years to be welcome at a polling station.

Once the provisions of federal Bill C-24 come into effect in 2015, even more people will be left in electoral purgatory, and for longer periods of time.

And yet, long before they take an oath of Canadian citizenship, permanent residents contribute much to our city. They pay property taxes and fees for programs and transit use. They are friends, neighbours, coaches, volunteers, entrepreneurs, tradespeople, researchers and professionals.

Extending the vote sends an important welcoming message to anyone who might consider coming to Halifax.

This is not a radical idea – it has been pursued in cities like Toronto and it has been implemented in many more cities around the world.

As important as the message to those who have made a commitment to their adopted city is the signal we send to those who might consider leaving Halifax or Nova Scotia. In giving permanent residents the same municipal voting rights as Canadian citizens, we say you're needed and your participation is valued in building a more diverse, prosperous and progressive city and province.

As a city, we acknowledge the concerns and the contributions of our residents regardless of citizenship. If we engage new residents early on they may well later become municipal candidates and Council members.

It's time to give voice to the very people we are counting on to shore up the economic future of our city and our province.