2008 Expert Roundtable on Canada's Experience with Pluralism

Pluralism as Process:
Places and Spaces for Managing Diversity

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The four papers in this session all provide important analyses of the actual processes by which a pluralist society, in this case Canada, manages diversity. In particular they focus on the multiple and diverse spaces in which this is done. In doing so, they identify and trace the contours of the spaces in which the "Canadian diversity model" operates.[1]

As these papers confirm, Canadians have worried about national identity and maintaining unity in a context of cultural diversity for all of the country's modern history. Since the end of the 18th century, the myth of a single and undifferentiated national identity has never been a viable option. Lord Durham proposed eliminating the institutional recognition of cultural differences between "English" and "French" in the first half of the 19th century, and that proposal was rejected. The Fathers of Confederation opted for federal institutions in 1867 as a means of recognising and protecting cultural, linguistic and religious diversity.

To say that there has been an acceptance of diversity does not mean of course that living with it has been easy. Nor has it been universally valued. In Canada, as everywhere else, xenophobia exists. But more prevalent are more subtle forms of exclusiveness that have been, and are still, present. They help shape actions in civil society and within the state.

Nonetheless, throughout the 20th century the public institutions of liberal democracy and education have been spaces for managing diversity, as have been the practices of religious pluralism and those within cities. They have provided the repertoire of the diversity model. This repertoire has emerged in response to Canada's long-standing sociological diversity, described in the first session of this Roundtable. It comprises both content and process.

Much of this repertoire is played out in civil society through cultural and political practices. More particularly, Paul Bowlby's paper focuses on the shift from Christian to religious pluralism and the current challenges to living out the latter, while Yasmeen Abu-Laban considers political parties, those bridges between civil society and the state. Yet, as they would agree, civil society is never the only space in which responses to diversity have developed or must develop.

The state is also a major player. Abu-Laban documents the ways in which public institutions, particularly federalism and liberal democratic institutions of representation, have played a key role by establishing some boundary conditions and by promoting certain practices allowing for greater inclusion in a highly diverse society. Marie McAndrew provides an overview of one space for managing diversity in any pluralist society – public schools. In Canada, they have had a complex and often uneasy relationship to ethnocultural differences. And finally, Kristin Good compares the repertoire of several municipal governments in order to explore the varied ways in which a signature Canadian public policy for managing diversity – multiculturalism – has been implemented in different urban spaces.

In commenting on these four rich and varied papers, I focus on three main points that are found in all four: that the patterns of pluralism, as well as the spaces for managing diversity, change over time; that social imaginaries play a key role in shaping the spaces, places and repertoire of action of Canadian pluralism; and that it is institutional configurations rather than individual public-policy interventions that matter for success or failure in the managing of diversity.

Changing spaces and dimensions of pluralism

The papers all recognise that the composition of the Canadian population has changed over time, with consequences for the places and spaces of operation of the Canadian diversity model. If Canada has always been a country of immigration, the places from which immigrants arrive and the places where they settle have changed dramatically over time.

The first immigrants were the French, then the British and then other Europeans. In the last decades, the largest groups of immigrants come from all parts of Asia and the Middle East. As both Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Kristin Good report with the data in their papers, more than composition has changed, however. Immigrants are overwhelmingly concentrated in a very few urban centres. Yasmeen Abu-Laban also reminds us that one in five Canadian citizens is foreign-born, a result both of high levels of immigration and a citizenship law that permits naturalisation after three years of residency.

This long history of changing patterns of immigration and settlement has provided political pressure for the creation of several types of public institutions. One is federalism, which Abu-Laban considers. It is an institutional arrangement explicitly designed to recognise difference, and has been in place in Canada since the mid-19th century.[2] More recently, the

Canadian Constitution of 1982, and especially the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, has added additional protections important for minorities in pluralist societies.

Another public institution has long been a major place for managing diversity. This is the public school, considered by Marie McAndrew. She makes the important point that public schools do not address all minorities in the same way. National minorities – anglophones in Quebec as well as francophones across the country – that are the product of the first waves of immigration have claimed constitutional recognition of their right to "use schooling to foster their cultural reproduction." For more recent immigrants, on the other hand, "school policies are mainly defined by educational authorities dominated by the majority group," whether English-speaking or, in the case of Quebec, the French-speaking majority. The issues of heritage languages and recognition of a right to expressions of cultural, especially religious, diversity in the schools are the direct consequences upon which she focuses in her paper.

Such expansion in the direction of accepting more dimensions of cultural and religious pluralism were not considered in 1867, of course. Taking an historical perspective, Paul Bowlby analyses in detail another consequence of altered patterns of immigration, focusing also on religious diversity, and thereby helps to understand why such limits existed.

He documents how, when immigration was dominated by waves of European origin, recognition and to some extent acceptance of pluralism was already the norm. It was differences between Catholics and Protestants as well the multiple divisions within Protestantism that set the boundaries of "religious" pluralism, however. Canadians had learned to live with diversity, albeit all within a common Judeo-Christian tradition. He describes this situation as having been one of "Christian pluralism."

With the more recent waves of immigration came a wider spectrum of more visible religions.[3] Also broader is the constitutional recognition of rights to non-discrimination that has meant the courts have been called to decide new claims for religious expression in schools, workplaces and elsewhere. Indeed, the courts have become new spaces for managing diversity. There are then "knock-on effects" for, among others, public schools, as McAndrew's comparison of Toronto and Quebec's policies toward religious accommodation reveal.

An additional consequence of changing immigration patterns is described by Kristin Good. Whereas in the first half of the 20th century many immigrants settled in rural areas, in recent decades the pattern is not only one of urban settlement but also of concentration in three or four metropolitan areas. This has meant that municipal officials (including education officials, as Marie McAndrew points out) and local leaders in civil society "negotiate many of the day-to-day decisions arising from multiculturalism. In other words, municipal institutions with powers designed for the 19th century have become the spaces for managing 21st century pluralism.

All four authors agree that these changing spaces never emerged automatically from the altered patterns of immigration. Addressing pluralism is always a process not an end-state. Moreover, understanding the process through time means paying attention to interpretation and meaning-making as well as policy responses within public and private institutions.

Institutionalizing social imaginaries of pluralism

In his paper, Paul Bowlby relies on the useful notion of "social imaginary." Built from Christian metaphors, right from the start competing social imaginaries characterised Canadian social and political life – the "cathedral" constructed of distinct and necessary elements for a French-Canadian like Wilfrid Laurier and a "dominion," both biblical and imperial, for English-speaking Canadians from Great Britain. The public sphere was never secular. Rather, "…the space in which Canadians debated public issues of their day for the edification of municipal, provincial and federal governments was permeated by public languages rooted in the diversity of Christian denominations, institutions and theologies."

This history – including its conflicts, dark sides, and contribution to nation building – has been forgotten, however, and not always to good effect. Bowlby describes something of a causal chain towards this lapse in memory, and its consequences. After 1945 and especially since the 1960s, there was "a profound re-imagining of Canada and its social make-up." The process was concretised by new legislation on citizenship and immigration as well as bilingualism and multiculturalism. As Bowlby says: "… Christian pluralism did not fit into this new emerging imaginary and little thought or consideration went into the emerging forms of religious pluralism taking shape with the new patterns of immigration. … governments progressively removed Christian institutions from their public roles in education and other public services such as health and social services," and did so without providing adequate substitutes.

He says that, coupled with the "widely held conviction that Canada is a secular society" – the new social imaginary one might say – the almost constant presence of religious issues (such as debates about Sharia law or politicised Islam) in public life has not generated a healthy approach to religious pluralism. Rather, "religions became defined by a limited, minority religious viewpoint. Religious pluralism and the diversity of religious voices in the debate were reduced in complexity. … This kind of exclusion makes religions more like the 'other' in the imperialist, orientalist constructions which characterized Canada's history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."

Bowlby calls therefore for a social imaginary in which the role of Christian pluralism in building both Canada and the Canadian diversity model is remembered. This memory of history could thereby open space for recognition of the legitimacy of religious practice in the public sphere (and not simply as a private practice), and allow religious pluralism to expand rather than contract by paying attention only to the extremes.

The importance of social imaginaries and their change over time are highlighted in other papers as well. Marie McAndrew makes an important point about the notion of "separateness" within the imaginary. While inclusion is a clear value of Canada's diversity model, its repertoire actually includes multiple spaces for separateness, including in schools. For historical reasons, religiously based schools were the norm for many years, although language is now the most important distinction recognised. She argues that the existence of separate schools has allowed for looser but also more stable ties across groups, and that therefore sometime "separate is better."

Like Bowlby, Yasmeen Abu-Laban explicitly stresses the importance of "ideas" – a formulation not far from the concept of social imaginary. She traces the shift from Canada's self-representation as a white settler colony modelled on Britain to its self-representation as a good global citizen, respectful of international human rights, a bastion against the ideas that had legitimised the horrors of the Holocaust and a supporter of decolonisation. By the 1960s this self-image clashed with Canada's existing public policies based on race-based exclusions and discrimination in favour of immigrants from Europe. Citizenship and immigration policies were reformed, indeed transformed.

She describes a double shift. One involved a move from an imperial to a multicultural representation of Canada, sustained by pride in Canada's "successful" diversity model. The model was institutionalised in law and by financial supports for institutions representing minorities, including form-making rights claims. The second shift involved a move from an imperial representation of Canada as "British" to one which clearly recognised two founding peoples (with their important institutions of federalism and for cultural protection) and then to one that is multinational, recognising the presence of Aboriginal peoples prior to "European contact." Neither of these shifts has occurred easily and without conflict, but tracking them reminds us that pluralist societies may engage in frequent redefinitions of themselves, all the while remaining focused on their pluralism.

For her part, Kristin Good provides an important counterpoint to this focus on the causal power of social imaginaries. In her analysis of the variations in implementation of one key element of Canada's self-representation of a successful pluralist society, she finds that "… some municipalities are *more willing* to get involved in managing and responding to social change than others. … The general lesson is that in the absence of clear direction from upper levels of government, local factors and contexts will result in variation in the extent to which municipalities contribute to 'social sustainability' through multiculturalism initiatives." The factors accounting for this variation range from local experiences of racial and ethnic conflict to local resources and capacities as well as the space for action allocated by each province. In other words, when one looks "on the ground," there is no one "Canadian diversity model" or even a single multicultural policy.

Marie McAndrew continues in this vein, when she argues that while "*good old assimilationism* as a normative position is slowly dying" researchers find that it still shapes school norms and practices. Moreover, where it is dead, no clearly dominant paradigm has replaced it. Multiple ideas, including scientific theories, are in circulation.

This said, however, one message that emerges from these four papers is that social imaginaries may change as much as sociological patterns *and these changes matter*. Abu-Laban stresses the contribution of new ideas to the elimination of discriminatory legislation and institutions. Bowlby reminds us, however, that a new social imaginary, if it drives out memory of an earlier one, may also make it more difficult to identify workable practices and institutions.

The spaces for managing diversity are institutional configurations, not a single policy

Too often attention to Canada's approach to societal pluralism is confined to its multiculturalism policy. All four papers agree, however, that such a definition is too narrow, and that the institutions that are involved and their practices go well beyond official multiculturalism.

They also all agree on the importance of thinking about institutional configurations at each level of government. For example, at the federal level the institutions in interaction are Parliament and the government, to be sure. But important to this configuration are also the Constitution and the courts and the institutions of federalism, ably analysed in Yasmeen Abu-Laban's paper. Paul Bowlby and Marie McAndrew both point out the role of the courts in protecting and advancing ethnocultural and religious rights.

At the provincial level, in turn, another configuration is involved. The institutions are provincial legislatures and governments, the laws and commissions of human rights, and the school system each province has established. Marie McAndrew's paper focuses on this configuration in particular. Here we see again the variation that exists in the "Canadian model" of responding to cultural pluralism. She tracks the story of heritage languages, that is languages other than English or French taught to students from that linguistic tradition. Despite several provinces engaging since the late 1970s in such teaching, they do not do the same things, nor for the same reasons: "In Quebec, official discourse has oscillated from a compensatory perspective where Heritage Languages would be taught in support of the learning of French to a more pluralistic perspective where a linguistic maintenance is seen as an asset for identity formation and links within the family. In Ontario, an alternative stress has sometimes been put on the asset HLP [Heritage language programme] would represent for the development of plurilingualism among majority English speakers." Neither central province, however, has gone as far as some of the western ones, which now provide schooling (rather than supplementary language courses) in languages other than English or French.

We see from this example that provincial institutions have a major role in setting out the terms of the Canadian diversity model, including the space available for reproduction of a plurality of languages and cultures in addition to informal as well as formal socialization to shared values. Schools are the institutions McAndrew focuses on, but Bowlby's his discussion of religiously based family law arbitration reminds us of the importance of provincial legal regimes. Abu-Laban also stresses that the provinces have "their own role to play in governing linguistic, cultural, ethnic and racial diversity."

Kristin Good focuses on another institutional configuration – at the municipal level in urban settings. In these settings, Canadian municipalities are not the constitutionally recognized entities; their powers depend on what responsibilities provincial governments assign to them. As Good describes the situation, "Canadian municipalities do not have formal mandates to adapt their services and governance structures to ethno-cultural diversity and to 'manage' diversity. As such, provinces do not financially assist municipalities in their multiculturalism policy efforts. However, as the diversity of responses to social change demonstrates, formal legal structures only tell part of the story."

Good describes four dimensions upon which municipal responses vary: the extent to which their response is comprehensive; the extent to which policies are institutionalised in the municipal civil service, the municipal council and in governance relationships; whether their policy styles are proactive, reactive or inactive; and finally, the extent to which leaders of minority communities consider municipalities to be responsive. The existence of these four dimensions of variation means a large range of differences prevail in these key places for managing diversity.

Two of the dimensions listed by Good lead directly to the fourth institutional configuration that receives attention in these papers, that of civil society. Here it is configurations of associations and political parties, as well as their leaders, which have the most effect on the ways in which diversity is managed. Where the management of diversity in Canadian cities has been particularly successful, local municipal leaders have, according to Good, done three things. One step is to institutionalise their commitments to pluralism in the local civil service. Beyond that, however, they have shaped relationships with civil society by funding community organizations that serve immigrants and ethno-cultural minorities, thereby contributing to community capacity building. And thirdly, they have incorporated minority communities into governance arrangements that include private – especially the business community – and public actors.

This attention to community capacity building via support for associations representing minorities is a key configuration for Yasmeen Abu-Laban, who describes the role of government funding, especially from the federal government, in supporting advocacy groups that represent minorities of all kinds. The women's movement's contribution to Canadian pluralism was helped by funding for its work, as were groups representing Aboriginal peoples, official language minorities and ethnocultural minorities. The Canadian diversity model, for Abu-Laban, has been built on support for an active civil society, and

she therefore supports Good's conclusion that "success" depends on a healthy civil society. Abu-Laban also points to the important role that political parties and these associations themselves play in sustaining the model through their own recognition practices.

The four papers all send a clear message about institutions as spaces for managing pluralism. First, the institutions that play major roles go well beyond those of a single policy, such as multiculturalism. The institutions guaranteeing the rule of law, liberal democracy, and equity at all levels of government form configurations that support the Canadian diversity model. Moreover, this supporting structure is not simply formed by public institutions. Private actions by the business community, political parties and advocacy group contribute to it as well.

Concluding remarks

Three messages have been identified in these papers.

First, *success in pluralist societies is not static*. It is a process in constant movement, with adjustments reflecting new domestic circumstances but also those in the international community. Canada's growing international commitments to human rights – as much as the reactions surrounding events such as those of September 11, 2001 – have shaped Canada's practices as a pluralist society. The Global Centre for Pluralism will profitably focus, therefore, on the transnational character of these processes as well as on their change over time in any particular national setting.

Second, *ideas and social imaginaries are important*. The way Canadians imagine their society, as well as matters such as religion, citizenship, the boundaries of public and private, immigration and so on, have profoundly structured their actions. Whether they imagined a unified imperial dominion or a two-nation compact or a multinational and multicultural Canada in good part determined their actions. Therefore, students of pluralism, of both its successes and failures, cannot afford to ignore the spaces for public debate in which social imaginaries are proffered, adopted and sidelined. In these spaces, the past is recounted, the present is described, and the future is dreamt. The Global Centre for Pluralism will profit by heeding this second message.

Third, *successful pluralist societies depend on multiple healthy institutions, both public and private*. The state, even when all of its own institutional forces are mobilized in the name of respect for pluralism, cannot substitute for civil society. Conversely, civil society organizations, no matter how strong and representative, cannot prevail when public institutions fail to serve as spaces for recognizing and managing diversity. The interdependence of state and civil society at all levels, from the local to the transnational, emerges clearly from these four analyses. Identifying the conditions under which healthy interdependence is generated and maintained is a key task for the Global Centre for Pluralism.

Endnotes

[1] The notion of the Canadian diversity model is developed in Jenson and Papillon (2001). Some of these introductory comments draw on that work.

[2] This early decision to set up federal institutions differs from that of some pluralist societies which lived a long history as a unitary state before choosing federalism. Belgium comes first to mind.

[3] The religious spectrum was always larger than the Canadian social imaginary of Christian pluralism recognized or emphasized, of course. Jews have been present in Canadian society for centuries, and visibly active in some cities throughout the 20th century. Chinese workers brought to Canada to work on railroad construction carried their religions with them, as did immigrants from the Middle East, who had well-established communities in provinces such as Nova Scotia and Quebec for most of the last century. Paul Bowlby also considers the Canadian social imaginary's blindness to, and ill treatment, of Aboriginal religious practices and spirituality.

Reference

Jenson, Jane and Martin Papillon. 2001. *The "Canadian Diversity Model": A Repertoire in Search of a Framework*. Ottawa: CPRN. Available at: www.cprn.org