

2008 Expert Roundtable on Canada's Experience with Pluralism

## **Canadian Multiculturalism: Historical and Political Contexts**

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Has multiculturalism worked in Canada? The answer to this question would depend on what one thinks are its goals and how one chooses to measure progress towards them. The varying meanings attached to words in the multiculturalism lexicon lead to expectations that are sometimes poles apart. Its terminology includes: pluralism, diversity, mosaic, melting pot, assimilation, integration, citizenship, national identity, core Canadian values, community, mainstream, majority, minority, ethnic, ethnocultural, race, racial, visible minority, immigrant, and diaspora.

Those who believe that multiculturalism has succeeded point to the consistently high support for it in national surveys, the success stories of immigrants who ascend social, economic or political ladders, and the growing number of mixed marriages. For those on the other side, the relevant indicators seem to be high crime statistics among particular groups, the failure of some visible-minority groups to replicate the economic success of previous generations of immigrants, the apparent lack of integration into Canadian society, and the emigration of some recent arrivals from Canada.

However, this paper takes the view that the scales are tipped in favour of multiculturalism's success in Canada. The overall evidence for this is the comparatively low level of ethnic, racial or religious strife in this country compared to other western states such as the U.K., France, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, and the U.S.A. Large proportions of immigrants to Canada indicate that they are pleased to have come to this country rather than to any other western nation, even as they continue to face certain disadvantages (Adams, 2007).

The success of Canadian multiculturalism has depended on many factors. Canada's history has produced a public ethos that is generally favourable to pluralism. The actions of certain leaders have been important in showing the direction to the diverse citizenry, which has also been largely agreeable to working out ways to accommodate difference. Multiculturalism does not stand on its own, but is integral to the Canadian state's overall social-policy framework, which addresses broader issues of pluralism. In addition to government, a number of other actors have helped to give substance to the policy. Civil society, for instance, has been vital to the institutionalization of pluralism. This includes the contributions of ethnocultural groups, social organizations, academia, and artists. The work of social entrepreneurs is also very important in developing viable structures for multiculturalism to operate in many sectors.

There are other elements that provide an enabling environment encouraging the expansion of pluralism in recent decades. The existence of the multiculturalism policy has fostered a conceptual framework and a language to address issues of diversity. It has encouraged minorities to make claims and has enabled agencies of government and civil society to respond in constructive manners. Primary multiculturalism legislation (section 27 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*) serves as the basis for a network of associated provisions in other laws and regulations supportive of pluralism. Finally, the broad acceptance of cultural pluralism across the political spectrum and among the public has ensured the general continuance of support for institutions dedicated to its operation in Canadian society – notwithstanding the significant enclaves of opposition to multiculturalism in the country.

## **Nation and multiculturalism**

Canadian multiculturalism has made a contribution to the reconceptualization of the nation. The idea of the sovereign nation-state, which emerged in 17th-century Europe, was based on the general notion of shared social characteristics of the population that lived within a particular territory (Renan, 1990).<sup>1</sup> The ancient Greek word *ethnos* – from which “ethnic” is derived – denotes “nation.” Views of the nation-state have involved the coalescence of ethnicity and territory to imply the existence of an ancestral homeland belonging to a particular people having kinship ties that are reflected in a common language and culture.

However, this concept has been consistently problematic. Nations in reality have not been containers of “pure ethnicities.” Due to the tendency of human beings to migrate<sup>2</sup> and to intermarry, there have rarely existed territories that are ethnically homogenous – despite the attempts by some to “cleanse” them. Cultural and linguistic particularities may be eliminated over time through the assimilation of variant groups, but new waves of migration tend to ensure diversity within national populations.

Colonialism replicated European forms of governance around the world. This included the separation of related peoples' identities and relationships by marking out fixed (although not completely immutable or impermeable) national borders, which were to be maintained

even after independence. Educational and media systems help to ensure that the global system of nation-states is accepted by all peoples as “natural.” (Blaut, 1993).

Contemporary states often sustain themselves with an adherence to a distinctive mythology, symbolism and culture associated with an ancient past. A continuous stream of messages encourages populations to believe in their authenticity. National mass-media systems emphasize the concept of the nation-state as the primary and natural form of polity. The systems play this role by continually highlighting national symbols ranging from the prominent portrayal of national leaders in regular news bulletins to the frequent retelling of tales gleaned from the national mythology in dramatic programs (to say nothing of the ubiquity of the national flag and references to national institutions). Renditions of the country’s map in relation to others clearly demarcate the citizens of various states as Ugandans, Kenyans, Tanzanians, and so on. A nation becomes a naturalized political, geographic, and ethno-cultural entity, which is distinct from all other nations in the imagination of not only its own residents but also those of others. (The system of nation-states exists by mutual recognition.)

But this neat modernist imaginary appears to have been affected considerably by the postmodernist ideas of the last decades of the twentieth century. The increased recognition of ethno-cultural diversity within national borders under policies of multiculturalism has seriously challenged the idea of a nation as ethnoculturally homogenous. Multiculturalism redefined the nation as comprising an ethnically pluralist populace. In practical terms, this new approach seeks to contain conflicts between competing ethnic groups within a state and effectively harness their skills as well as their intellectual and economic resources. Nevertheless, the primary cultural values of a country’s dominant ethnic groups remain hegemonic even as some aspects of minorities’ cultural heritage are incorporated into the national symbolic landscape, particular forms of racial discrimination are outlawed, and certain measures are instituted to enable greater minority participation in the public sphere.

## **The roots of Canadian pluralism**

In October 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s announced the establishment of the multiculturalism policy in the House of Commons. He stated:

We believe that cultural pluralism is the very essence of Canadian identity. Every ethnic group has the right to preserve and develop its own culture and values within the Canadian context. To say that we have two official languages is not to say we have two official cultures, and no particular culture is more “official” than another. A policy of multiculturalism must be a policy for all Canadians. (Harney, 1988, 69)

With this, Trudeau replaced the policy of “bilingualism and biculturalism” with “multiculturalism within a bilingual framework.”

The particular history of Canada has shaped a multiculturalism that is quite distinct from that of other countries. The character of Canadian pluralism appears to be “organic” because it has been embedded over time in the historical development of the social relations of its inhabitants. It was the specific unfolding of events and courses taken by particular peoples and individuals in this country over many decades that led to the emergence of multiculturalism. That the Canadian government was the first in the world to make it national policy was no accident.<sup>3</sup> The groundwork for this development was laid two centuries prior to Trudeau’s announcement.

The roots of the Canadian state’s pluralism appear to lie in the seemingly counterintuitive accommodation of the French population in the aftermath of the 1759 British conquest of colonial Quebec. Whereas the effects of the British victory over French interests have been the subject of ongoing debate, there did emerge over time an entente between communities of settlers in contrast to the suppressive actions of the agents of the British colonial government in Canada. The Governor General Lord Durham pursued a policy of assimilating the French in the 1830s. The 1840 *Act of Union* merged the political entities of Upper and Lower Canada, severely diminishing French political influence. But it was the collaboration between French and British Canadians – whose representatives worked together in the Assembly – that reinstated French rights. The *British North America Act* (1867) established a limited policy of bilingualism, permitting the use of French along with English in Canada’s Parliament and federal courts.<sup>4</sup> The official use of French in specific federal institutions grew over subsequent decades. By the mid-twentieth century, Canada was increasingly described as a “bilingual and bicultural” country. Other cognate terms were “two founding nations,” “two founding peoples,” “two charter groups” and “English and French Canada.”<sup>5</sup> Roman Catholicism, the religion of most francophones, was given official recognition in addition to the Church of England, and representatives of both denominations were present on state occasions.

Despite these arrangements, there was a strong feeling in Quebec that the federal government had failed to establish the equality of English and French in government institutions. This led to a growth in the 1960s of the movement promoting the secession of the province from the federation. In 1963, Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson established the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism to

inquire into and report upon the existing state of bilingualism and biculturalism in Canada and to recommend what steps should be taken to develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal partnership between the two founding races, taking into account the contribution made by the other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution. (Esman, 1985, pp. 45-66)

It was some of “the other ethnic groups,” such as Ukrainian and Polish communities in the Prairie provinces, that vehemently protested to the Commission that they did not see a place for themselves in a country defined solely as bilingual and bicultural. Aboriginal peoples did not even appear to have a voice in the Canadian public sphere at this point.

## **Multiculturalism and the social justice agenda**

Trudeau made the pursuit of a “just society” a key pillar of his policy agenda when he became prime minister in 1968. His agenda was characterized by an effort to enhance participatory democracy and foster greater inclusiveness. This included support for the newly implemented universal health-care and regional-development programs, as well as social policies such as official bilingualism. Immigration legislation still had vestiges of race-based criteria; they were replaced with a points-based system that enabled more people from Asia, Africa and Latin America to be welcomed.<sup>6</sup> Canada’s first *Human Rights Act* was also passed during Trudeau’s tenure in 1977.

The establishment of multiculturalism was part of the ‘just society’ agenda. It was a bold step, but one that was very much in keeping with the extension of participatory democracy within a pluralist context. Quebec nationalists saw the replacement of the bilingualism and biculturalism formula with multiculturalism within a bilingual framework as a ploy by the federal government to thwart their aspirations. But the institution of multiculturalism in the Canadian context would most likely not have been conceivable without the precedence of biculturalism. The latter had already broken with the concept of a culturally monolithic nation-state; it had legitimized the principle of pluralism as a way to ensure good governance. Even though it took over 100 years to recognize the broader diversity of Canada, it was the “bi” that made the “multi” possible.

However, Jean Chretien, minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development in the Trudeau government (and later, prime minister), had proposed an assimilationist policy for Aboriginal peoples in 1969 (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1969). It advocated the elimination of separate legal status for native people in Canada and the transfer of responsibility for Indian Affairs to the provinces. This was viewed by First Nations as diminishing the position they had secured under various treaties with the Crown. Under Trudeau’s ‘just society’ framework, Aboriginal peoples would have the same body of rights as others. The ‘multiculturalism within a bilingual framework’ would also include them. First Nations saw these policies as diminishing their status, especially with respect to land claims. The federal government over time acknowledged the distinct set of policy issues pertaining to indigenous peoples and developed a separate approach for them, as it did for Quebec.

Multiculturalism has survived politically in Canada because it has found its niche among the various contesting discourses that form the state’s system of participatory democracy. It co-exists with the Quebec and Aboriginal agendas, as well as with policies addressing additional social-justice issues such as those of human rights, economic equality, gender,

disability, and regional parity. Multiculturalism was embraced by the Progressive Conservative government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in the 1980s because it had become part of core Canadian concerns.<sup>7</sup> The *Multiculturalism Act* was sponsored by his government, which also established the short-lived Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship in the early 1990s. Even though the Reform Party was vehemently against multiculturalism and bilingualism during its early years, it came to realize that this position would act as a barrier to electability in eastern Canada and in large cities across the country. Former Reform politicians in the current Conservative government have put away their opposition to multiculturalism to support the establishment of the Global Centre for Pluralism.

The political exploitation of multiculturalism has been a long-standing criticism of the tactics of the various parties that have treated ethnic groups as voting blocs. Whereas such approaches have sometimes bent the rules of proper conduct, politicians have generally not stooped to overt ethnic, racial or religious vilification of their opponents. On the other hand, the political mobilization of minorities has drawn an increasing number of their members into the arena of democratic participation in Canada. Although their relative proportions remain small, minority groups are increasingly present among elected officials at the federal, provincial and municipal levels.

### **The legislative and bureaucratic infrastructure**

The incorporation of multiculturalism into the Canadian Constitution in 1982 as part of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* enshrined it as a central national principle. This was further enhanced by the passage of the *Multiculturalism Act* in 1988. Its preamble states that

the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada. (Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, 1990, p. 1)

Diversity was recognized as a “fundamental characteristic of Canadian society.” The government committed itself to developing policies and programs “to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians” as well as to strive toward the equality of all citizens.

However, despite demands by ethnocultural associations for parity with the bilingualism policy, multiculturalism legislation did not provide for enforcement mechanisms or even oversight by an official commissioner (as is the case with bilingualism). Fiscal allocations were also considerably smaller than those for official-languages programs. Ministers

responsible for multiculturalism have had to use a softer approach to encourage departments and agencies of the federal government to pursue their obligations under the *Multiculturalism Act*. The annual report on the operation of the *Act* has become one of the mechanisms by which the multiculturalism program monitors relevant activities across government. The program also acts as a resource for them.

Several other federal organizations have demonstrated significant initiative in pursuing the multiculturalism mandate. The collection of data on race, ethnicity, language and religion in a number of social and economic contexts by Statistics Canada and other agencies has provided steady streams of hard information about the status and progress of minorities in Canada. These data have been useful for government and non-governmental agencies in enhancing their strategies to address issues of diversity. Federal departments and agencies report initiatives as part of their input to the multiculturalism program's annual report (Multiculturalism Program, 2007). Whereas some of these enterprising efforts stand out, most institutions do not appear to have a coherent or comprehensive approach to multiculturalism.

The government has enacted supportive legislation that deals with various aspects of life not specifically covered in the *Charter* and the *Multiculturalism Act*. Canadians' rights and responsibilities are addressed in the *Citizenship Act* (1985), for instance. The *Canadian Human Rights Act* (1985) has measures against racial and other forms of discrimination, and the Criminal Code lists provisions against hate propaganda. Standards that promote the employment of visible minorities in federal agencies and federally regulated businesses are found in the *Employment Equity Act* (1996). The *Broadcast Act* (1991) states that the Canadian broadcasting system should

through its programming and the employment opportunities arising out of its operations, serve the needs and interests, and reflect the circumstances and aspirations, of Canadian men, women and children, including equal rights, the linguistic duality and multicultural and multiracial nature of Canadian society and the special place of aboriginal peoples within that society... (Section 3 (d) iii)

These requirements have been further enhanced through Cabinet Orders in Council and directives of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (Karim, 2011). After reaching a peak in the 1990s, the bureaucratic infrastructure of multiculturalism in the federal government has declined steadily. This has dramatically reduced its role and, consequently, its effectiveness.

## **Civil society and entrepreneurs**

Canadian government leaders appear to have responded well to the demands to address issues of pluralism raised by various groups. But multiculturalism in Canada would have certainly failed if non-governmental institutions had then not acted to build on the

structures formulated by government. Ethnic and religious organizations have flourished across the country and have become important institutions that provide services to their communities and interact with other parts of Canadian society. (Some, however, have been criticized for being insular). Certain mainstream bodies have incorporated principles of diversity into their practices. Institutions in areas of education, health, housing, social welfare and other areas of life have been innovative and enterprising in developing country-wide networks and programs that have implemented pluralism in practical ways, although there continues to be internal resistance in some quarters.

There has been considerable sharing of knowledge and good practices at community, municipal, provincial and national levels. In fact, Canada is viewed as an international leader in addressing cultural diversity and receives numerous requests for information from other countries. Apart from the data collection and dissemination by government research sections, a considerable amount of knowledge is produced by NGOs. Research centres devoted either partially or wholly to the examination of pluralism add to the information produced. Universities and colleges have also played a key role in cutting-edge research and training. Significant numbers of academics in a wide range of disciplines are engaged in investigating diversity issues. Individual researchers acting as consultants have also contributed significantly to the scientific understanding of pluralism.

Whereas the mainstream media are frequently criticized for their insensitive and occasionally racist portrayal of minorities, they are integral to the pluralism enterprise in Canada. As they come to terms with the rapidly changing population and learn to adopt new ways of covering communities, they are contributing to the self-image of the country as multicultural. Earnest discussions about the manners in which to provide fair reporting about all Canadians occur among journalists, academics and community representatives in various fora. Although there remains substantial room for progress, a number of print, broadcast and online media are conducting ground-breaking work in this area.

The ethnic media have had a long history in this country of ensuring diversity of coverage. These enterprises are viewed as serving two primary purposes: they contribute to cultural maintenance and ethnic cohesion, and they help members of minorities integrate into the larger society (Browne, 2005). Whereas most ethnic newspapers remain small, several have become national dailies and a few have transnational distribution. Broadcasters like OMNI and CHIN Radio have been pioneers and are now a mainstay in the programming offered on Canadian television and radio, respectively (Karim, 2011).

Entrepreneurs in other endeavours of life have developed private institutions in sectors such as education and health. Not to be overlooked are the ethnic grocery stores and restaurant owners, who have long provided invaluable material and cultural support to communities. Artists and musicians have not only entertained ethnic and larger public audiences, but in some cases have also established training schools. Leading Canadian authors and filmmakers from minority backgrounds have showcased their cultures in award-winning productions. Such cultural capital is attaining added significance in the globalized



economy. Members of diasporas have shown themselves to be transnationally mobile and to have adopted a cosmopolitanism that is often innovative and cutting-edge.

## Lessons from Canadian multiculturalism

No one country in the world can claim to have all the answers in engaging constructively with diversity. Despite the supposed “failure of multiculturalism” in various states, the U.S.A., Australia, the U.K., the Netherlands and France have developed some viable practices in dealing with pluralism. The experiences of non-immigrant receiving countries like India, Malaysia, and South Africa are also very instructive.

The Canadian model of pluralism is far from perfect. Racism and other forms of discrimination have not been eliminated in this country. Visible minorities experience higher levels of unemployment than the general population, and the situation for many Aboriginal people is dismal. Canadian multiculturalism policy has not been able to account for issues of cultural and racial hybridity nor for the growing importance of global diasporic links. Nevertheless, this society has made considerable progress on the way to ensuring equity for all in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres. Pluralism has generally worked because it has been linked with democratically based good governance and the participation of civil society.

In considering what aspects of Canadian multiculturalism may be transferable to other countries, one might look at the following:

- The particular development of Canadian pluralism indicates that the historical and cultural context of the country is important; a policy or practice cannot be transported *holus bolus* from one nation to another.
- The resilience of Canadian multiculturalism is dependent on the fact that it is part of a comprehensive approach to pluralism; the institution of similar approaches elsewhere should account for the politics of the country and be linked to its larger social justice agenda.
- Multiculturalism legislation is integral to the broader Canadian legislative and regulatory structures; it is important that such laws in other states be developed within the context of their respective legislative infrastructures.
- The limits of multiculturalism are circumscribed by the broad national consensus on common values; however, it is important to recognize that what may be identified as national values in a particular period are not static but evolve over time.
- The role played by leaders who have demonstrated genuine understanding of, and commitment to, addressing diversity in their societies is crucial to moving the pluralism agenda forward.
- The participation of a broad range of government departments and agencies is important for the successful implementation of policies.

- The active involvement of civil society actors and entrepreneurs is vital for the actualization of pluralism in society.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas the sovereign had the duty to protect religious minorities under the Peace of Westphalia, the nation was most closely identified with the majority.

<sup>2</sup> Whereas migration has accelerated in recent times, it has existed throughout the history of humankind.

<sup>3</sup> Canada is the only country to date that has full-fledged legislation on multiculturalism, namely, the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1988).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Gwyn (2007) notes the role of Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. MacDonald, in ensuring the recognition of French linguistic rights. He cites the Scottish-born leader's own experience of living as a member of a minority in the nascent United Kingdom in identifying some of the possible reasons for his empathy towards the French in Canada.

<sup>5</sup> But, according to Hugh MacLennan's characterization, the two peoples tended to function often as "two solitudes" (MacLennan, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that most European sources of immigration were drying up and Canada had a growing demand for labour.

<sup>7</sup> The Tories sought to use the policy to make political gains among minority ethnocultural communities, as the Liberals had done previously.

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