

# CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

EDITORIAL

## Multiculturalism and its feet of clay

### THE QUESTION: AM I BETTER OFF THAN MY PARENTS?

It is false to think that multiculturalism, Canada's signature program, should make us a more tolerant, open, and just society. There is always a deep and jagged fault line in nation-building policies. Some individuals get on board and catch the train. They send their children to school, become integrated into Canadian society, and feel they belong.

The operative word is "feel," because historians and demographers tell us that immigrants face huge boulders on their path when they arrive resource-poor, with few networks and little support. They are stigmatized as strangers in our midst and made to feel like outsiders because they are newly arrived. In every society the immigrant lives initially at the margin for a generation or more. A better

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measure is what happens to immigrants over a period of three generations. Children of Italian, Portuguese, Serbian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and African families inevitably ask: am I better off than my parents?

The answer is not always upbeat. Many immigrants cannot catch the multicultural train because they don't have the skills and connections or the support from governments to take the huge step to economic and cultural security. For instance, immigrant women are often kept out of the labour market or forced to work in the most menial parts of the economy. Others are disadvantaged by

race, class, and belief. So multiculturalism's promise of a better life does not reach them in the least, for they are outside of the integration process. Many of the contributors to this issue argue passionately and with reason that multiculturalism has feet of clay. The boulders on the path seem to become larger, more exclusionary, and systemic for many new Canadians as well as for older, established communities.

### THE DARK SIDE OF DIVERSITY

Recent census data read like an indictment of Canadian multiculturalism and the practice of diversity. There is a correlation between income inequality and racial and ethnic origin. So if you are of European descent, the Canadian multiculturalism story reads like a success. If

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### ASK A POLLSTER: Is multiculturalism working as part of our value system?

## Multiculturalism ain't broke

### A LOSE-LOSE PROPOSITION?

It sometimes appears that multiculturalism has very few friends in this country. Pundits tell us that we Canadians, like citizens of other Western countries, are too "tolerant" for our own good. Multiculturalism, once seen as a fair-minded, idealistic vision that Canadians could be proud of, is now commonly blamed for a host of social ills: civic apathy, loss of identity, gender inequality, fragmentation, ghettoization, even racism and terrorism. Whereas multicultur-

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alism was once seen as good for immigrants and good for Canada, it is now a lose-lose proposition. Or so some commentators tell us.

When ordinary Canadians are surveyed, however, another picture emerges. Canadians do have concerns about their

country's immigration and refugee policies, and they have concerns about the social integration of newcomers. On the whole, however, Canadians remain proud of their country's diversity and of

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redefine THE POSSIBLE.

you are from the Middle East, South Asia, or Africa and find yourself shoehorned into low-income jobs and a cycle of economic insecurity, multiculturalism is a story of failure.

The vision and the promise of multiculturalism are troubled and unfulfilled, but that is also to be expected. The tensions and discontents of modern society are not alleviated by a single program. It is naive to expect otherwise. France is not a more tolerant society because of its republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity; American racism has not been eradicated because of the American Constitution. Powerful myths in a country's culture often perform a different function. They create the aspirational standard to protect minority rights in the integration process. No less, they reinforce the intolerant attitude of the majority that immigrants demand too much and live apart in their ethnic and religious solitudes.

## PARIZEAU'S ATTACK ON "ETHNICS"

Canadian multiculturalism has to be seen in this light. Because Canada has never had a strong "I am Canadian" culture, Canadian immigrants and newcomers have not been expected to assimilate into the culture of the majority to be Canadian. How could it be otherwise?

This pluralist conception of the national community has given the politics of citizenship a great deal of room to evolve. This has meant that at a national level Canadians and Quebecers have had to devise institutions that construct a more differentiated identity, one based on a functional belief in pluralism, tolerance, and basic fairness. It was Jacques Parizeau's attack on "ethnics" for the referendum loss that forced Quebecers to bury the old Quebec nationalism and extend the boundaries of national community to all residents. English Canada also had to confront the tsunami-like after effects.

We can see, looking in the rear-view mirror of history, that identity politics has

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been an evolving process and not a one-shot deal. Control of the ethnic vote greatly helped the Liberal Party win repeated electoral majorities. Harper has tried hard to woo his "ethnics," but his rewards and incentives haven't tipped the balance in his favour. The idea of identity politics would never have captured the imagination had not new Canadians been able to participate in the political life of the country—slowly, at first, but now everywhere in the political arena, in all parties. The diversity is impressive despite the stereotype that only the Liberals have built their fortunes on ethnic party-client relationships.

So, far from being a one-track minimalist liberal creed tied to market fundamentalism, diversity and citizenship infused Canadian society with a big idea agenda that had to be managed by Ottawa, the provinces, and the cities. Immigrants have needed to be housed, helped with job searches and often job retraining, helped to master a language; and everyone has to have education provided.

This signature program has taken on significant importance since the 1980s, when European immigration virtually stopped and roughly 250,000 immigrants annually came from South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Canada became a multicultural society not through planning but for complex reasons. Diversity overwhelmed nativism, and the two founding European societies had to adjust to millions of new immigrants.

The 1982 *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Multiculturalism Act*

of 1988, and other pieces of human rights legislative activism have given Canadians a way to differentiate themselves from Americans, from the American consumer culture, and, most importantly, from American political values. This sense of separateness does not mean that Canadians and Americans are opposed at every point, but it indicates some critical fundamental differences between the two societies.

## NORTH AMERICAN DIVERSITY COMPARED

The American dream of citizenship is powerfully focused on individual rights and collective achievements. Citizenship is a right to be earned, not an entitlement. You are expected to leave behind a lot of your own culture and become an American. It is always US-centric and focused on America's awareness of its own internal cultural boundaries and its uncertainties and fears. The prototypical American frontier experience is one where the frontier by sheer power extinguishes cultural differences in the name of a new cosmopolitan future.

By contrast, Canadian multiculturalism is about collective acceptance and the importance of diversity to modern Canada. It promises citizenship to all who immigrate. You stay pretty much who you are. Expectations that you will shed your skin as the price of entry are not part of the story. The concept of "multicultural" was based on the principle that no one group takes precedence over any other—all identities are in theory equal and government at all levels welcomes and encourages active citizenship.

## NEW THREATS AND CHALLENGES

Immediately we can see why this kind of comparison is so fragile. Post 9/11, the security-obsessed Harper government, through its use of security certificates and its active role in the US rendition of Maher Arar, has trampled the human rights of many Muslim Canadians. The debate in Toronto over Africentric

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schools at times veered dangerously off course, and the doctrine of reasonable accommodation seemed to hold very little currency. The Harper government has imposed visa restrictions on Mexicans, claiming that too many Mexicans are applying for political refugee status. In her article for this issue of *Canada Watch*, Barbara Jackman puts her finger on the central dilemma. An Ontario Court of Appeal ruled in 2003 (*R v. Brown*) that racial profiling by the police is not acceptable, but police in Canada's major cities continue to use these and other techniques. So the question that we have to ask is whether Canada, despite the dramatic impact of the global flow of immigrants, has constructed silos of exclusion and racism. Are we going backwards into the future?

It is no coincidence that Canada's great experiment with diversity occurred during two decades of economic expansion and unprecedented wealth creation. Economic research makes the fundamental point that inclusion can only be sustained when the majority does not feel threatened by newly arrived immigrant communities and the immigration process provides safe passage for new Canadians and their families. At these times, families save, buy houses, and send their children to college or university. The perennial questions asked are: Am I better off than my parents? Can I take care of them? What is my future?

## COMPLACENCY AND MELANCHOLY

In a strange way the Canadian psyche appears to be drawn to melancholy about both the successes and shortcomings of multiculturalism. In the left assessment, system and structure are blamed for racializing Canadian society. Its fiercest critics call multiculturalism a sham. In the conservative critique, it has become a source of danger and instability. The right demands that immigration stop and immigrants assimilate.

Many Canadians are shocked to learn that the northern model of Canadian

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capitalism is distinct and that the differences between Canada and the United States have become larger in an era of free trade. So far, integration pressures have not supported any new holistic environment or given birth to a set of loyalties that transcends national, class, and ethnic divisions. What happens behind the border makes a fundamental difference to a strong social bond, vital public authority, and the dynamic practice of citizenship. These differences among Canadians and between Americans and Canadians continue to haunt and bewilder us.

Public intellectuals like Michael Adams, John Ralston Saul, and Linda McQuaig have explained the growing divergence between the United States and Canada as a result of Canadian val-

ues and institutions. Seymour Martin Lipset, the eminent American sociologist, has provided a more powerful explanation of the long-term trajectory of these two societies and the way they each chose to exploit their human and physical geography.

He notes that the United States favoured limited political interference in the conduct of social and religious affairs and privileged individual enterprise. Canada favoured large-scale bureaucratic forms of organization and widespread intervention by the state. The Confederation was collectivist in our founding moment, while the Republic was rights-based as befitted a Lockean world of property and civic virtue.

It is not unimportant to look at the origins of Canadian multiculturalism in these defining moments of political culture from the past. They are instructive about Canada's political culture. Canada has done better than the United States in reconciling the efficiency of markets with the values of social community, but this sort of generalization remains highly problematic and obscures our understanding of this transformative program. We are too self-satisfied and smug about multiculturalism's discontents. In a global age where diversity is now the rule everywhere, our myopia is indeed worrisome. 

## Ask a pollster

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the way that diversity is managed—of the approach we call multiculturalism.

Over the past four decades multiculturalism has become central to Canadians' sense of themselves and their country. In 2003, 85 percent of Canadians said that multiculturalism was important to Canadian identity.<sup>1</sup> More Canadians cite multiculturalism as central to the national identity than bilingualism or hockey. Also in 2003, four out of five Canadians (81 percent) agreed that multiculturalism has contributed positively to the national identity.

## A SOURCE OF IDENTITY AND PRIDE

Not only do Canadians feel that multiculturalism is a central part of their country's identity; it's also increasingly a source of pride. In 1985 we asked Canadians to tell us in their own words what made them proud to be Canadian. Multiculturalism was in tenth place. People were more likely to cite the beauty of the land, Canada's natural resources, and even the physical size of the country. By 2006, multiculturalism had climbed to second place. Only Canada's democracy was