

# Dealing with the challenges of ethnocultural diversity: Quebec and the conundrum of reasonable accommodation

## QUESTIONING REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION

By most accounts, Quebec is a good place to live for members of ethnocultural minorities. A recent survey revealed that nearly eight in ten immigrants feel that the francophone majority is open-minded toward them and the diversity of their cultures. The Quebec state has designed and implemented over time an extensive array of diversity management policies aimed at protecting the fundamental rights of ethnocultural minority groups, facilitating their integration, and curtailing all forms of socioeconomic discrimination that target them specifically. Practices of accommodation allowing individuals and groups to live by their own cultural and religious standards in the public sphere—the so-called reasonable accommodation—have been an intrinsic part of Quebec's socio-institutional landscape for more than two decades. They have been largely unproblematic and are generally hailed as an exemplary illustration of Quebec's eager openness to pluralism and ethnocultural diversity.

## TESTING ATTITUDES TOWARD DIVERSITY

This image of successful diversity management and harmonious integrative policy has been severely put to the test in the past two years. In the wake of a string of sensational news reports relating examples of purported abuses of the principle of accommodation of cultural and religious difference, calls to restrict manifestations of otherness in public spaces, limit the extent of socio-cultural diversity, and impose on minorities stricter conditions of social integration have multiplied. They reached a fever pitch in January 2007 when the small,

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rural town of Hérouxville, 160 kilometres northeast of Montreal, attracted worldwide attention with its code of behaviour designed for prospective immigrants: its proponents unequivocally meant to prevent public displays of cultural, reli-

gious, and social attitudes that did not conform to the liberal, Judeo-Christian norms of the Euro-descendant francophone majority. Quebec's model of ethnocultural diversity management, for all its apparent merits, was under attack.

The intense public malaise that ensued prompted the government to launch in February 2007 a vast process of public consultation, headed by high-profile academics Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, to feel the pulse of the population about existing practices of accommodation related to cultural and religious difference. The Bouchard-Taylor Commission, as it became known, visited 17 regions and towns of Quebec through the fall, holding heavily attended, televised public hearings and inviting all citizens and civil society organizations to express their views freely, either orally or in a written brief, on the management of cultural and religious diversity, the integration of immigrants, and the fundamental values and rights that should inform Quebec society. The co-chairs completed their tour in mid-December and delivered their report at the end of March 2008.

Overall, the whole enterprise proved to be a commendable and noteworthy exercise in open democracy. The unpleasant spleen-venting and immigrant/minority-bashing that some commentators dreaded did not really occur as the co-chairs were quick to discourage and deflect any hint of disrespectful or ill-informed comments. Still, 335 written briefs and 20 public meetings later, the end result essentially confirmed what numerous letters to the editor, web logs, and public opinion polls had widely indicated during the months before the commissioners began their work: large segments of the Quebec population—as many as three in four Quebecers,

according to some polls—have serious misgivings about the accommodation of cultural and religious differences in public spaces and would rather do away with it. A deep, collective anxiety about the possible, negative impact of reasonable accommodation on the maintenance of Quebec's dominant culture and social norms emerged as a strong narrative thread that ran through a majority of briefs and interventions made during the hearings.

## THE BIGGER PICTURE

This apparent decline of public support for reasonable accommodation in Quebec has deep-seated roots, which superficial, ready-made answers to this question fail to address: “The media blew everything out of proportion”; fear and ignorance of the other; post-9/11 Islamophobia and Arabophobia; Quebecers' frustration at the unwillingness of immigrants to endorse their nationalist aspirations, etc. Although contemporary mainstream Quebec society has never been, strictly speaking, a colonial or imperial power like Europe or the United States, it nevertheless exists as an offshoot of the history of rule and domination that the latter have imposed on the world. As such, Quebec's social and cultural hierarchies are intimately informed by the exclusionary patterns of power that Euro-American hegemony has developed in its relation with non-Western cultures and ethnic groups and by the West's deeply ingrained sense of superiority vis-à-vis all that does not originate from its sociocultural framework. Furthermore, one must not forget that the process of defining the boundaries of citizenship, the conditions of inclusion in a political community, and the contents of the nation is an act of power whereby dominant groups determine unilaterally what the criteria of belonging will be. The current reluctance of Quebec's Euro-descendant francophone majority to assent to further socio-institutional accommodation must be understood as a reaction to perceived threats to the legitimacy of its historically determined social power, and

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therefore as an attempt to reconfirm its social ascendancy.

Quebec is certainly not unique in this regard. The debate over reasonable accommodation simply echoes the fundamental ambivalence of liberal democracies vis-à-vis otherness and their unwillingness to assume the full consequences of their theoretical commitment to individual freedom, particularly when it calls for the reconfiguration of the existing structures of power and exclusion. This reading of the situation will seem offensive and inappropriate to those who think that the history of French-speaking Quebecers within Canada has been marked to this day by social and political processes of minorization and inferiorization. Be that as it may, it does not take away the fact that Quebec's state and society are firmly rooted in a profoundly Western understanding of social and cultural hierarchies that obliterates all non-Western traditions.

## RETHINKING ETHNOCULTURAL DIVERSITY

Quebec's saga over reasonable accommodation is instructive. It speaks to the growing difficulty that contemporary liberal democracies experience in coming to grips with issues of social cohesion and questions related to the integration of ethnically and culturally diverse populations that increasingly expect to enjoy the benefits of citizenship on their own terms, according to parameters differing often considerably from mainstream social and cultural norms of membership in the political community. Can Quebec rise to the challenge? Clearly, to those who think that our dem-

ocracy is fine as it is, and that it must be preserved at all costs in its current form, the special identity claims of immigrants and otherized communities will always appear as a threat, and should not be accommodated.

## THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

If, on the contrary, one thinks that our democracy could use improvement when it comes to dealing with the recognition of otherness, the challenge may be much more demanding than it seems. Simple institutional tweaking and well-intended exhortations to respect others will no longer do, for they never deal with the roots of the problem. Real, transformative social change that is unequivocally meant to strengthen and enhance democracy requires that we think outside the box—that is, outside hegemonic, Western categories, notions, and goals of unitary nationhood.

This implies a radical rejection of the social and cultural ascendancy that Euro-descendants have imposed and maintained on immigrants, racialized minorities, and First Peoples. It implies as well that a real intercultural dialogue be initiated. Not a dialogue of the kind that calls for the convergence of minority cultures toward the hub of the majority culture, as the official Quebec government policy would have it, but one where “us” and “them” congregate on a totally new, level playing field to draw the parameters of community, citizenship, and nationhood together. This is the challenge for Mr. Bouchard and Mr. Taylor and it is unclear whether the government will welcome this more unsettling route. Surely, though, there is no harm in hoping. 