



Multiculturalism

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As a settler nation, Canada has been shaped from the very beginning by immigration and by the ongoing attempt to reconcile the existence of a plurality of cultures within its borders. With the dichotomy of French and English cultures as its foundation, Canadian policy was aimed towards the accommodation of conflicting cultures from its origin as an official nation. From there, immigration was a natural next step, and multiculturalism was inevitably made official policy with the Multiculturalism Act in 1988, after having been proclaimed in 1971. While other countries, attempting different models of cultural integration, have begun to lament their perceived 'failure' of multiculturalism, this is not true of Canada. In the Canadian context, multiculturalism is not simply the presence of diversity within the country, or even necessarily the complete integration of it, but rather the willingness and ability of those diverse cultures to thrive, without a necessarily distinct 'majority' culture, and for other cultures to have the ability to experience one another. By that definition, multiculturalism is alive in Canada, a country in which minority rights are entrenched in law, existing in vibrant communities of varying heritages, policy and practise joining together to form what is considered 'Canadian'.

John Ibbitson, in his book The Polite Revolution: Perfecting the Canadian Dream, argues that immigration is the most important policy to Canada. In light of an aging and declining population, immigration is the answer to future economic troubles, and "Canadian multicultural lack-of-identity uniquely positions this country to succeed" (Ibbitson, 98) in regards to immigration. Canada's multicultural policy and lack of distinct majority culture makes Canada ever more accommodating to immigrants of diversified backgrounds. Our political approach is not completely unique, but it is the addition of our ambivalent identity that compounds polity to make Canada appealing. Still, the legal approach, the stressed importance of immigration policy and the entrenched rights of minority groups are part of what contributes to Canada's

multiculturalism today. Allison Harell and Dietlind Stolle, in their article “Diversity and Democratic Politics: An Introduction,” explain it as that “Canada... [has] adopted a multicultural approach where [the national government recognizes] the rights of ethnic minorities in various arenas of culture, education, politics and religion” (Harell, 244). The funding, representation and protection of minority culture are held to a high degree of importance, as opposed to countries where a much higher degree of integration is stressed. In the Peel public school board where this endorsement of ethnic representation is seemingly breached, with an under representation of minorities, the matter is serious enough for the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal to have been called in (Grewal). If the hearing, to be held in May, makes the decision for the applicant, then this diversity issue will become a part of case law, further stressing the importance of the protection of minority rights in the legal sphere.

Canada remains a strong contender for immigration, and thus multiculturalism, and last year a record high number of immigrants were accepted into Canada. At 280,600 new permanent residents, this number was above even the federal government's target maximum (Keung). In Quebec, where multiculturalism is often viewed as a threat to French cultural survival, a similar policy of ‘interculturalism’ is being heralded instead, and even its champions admit that it overlaps with multiculturalism. The main difference, as it is explained, is that “multiculturalism's founding assumption is that there is no dominant culture in Canada,” while interculturalism protects that same diversity—but sanctions the importance of the francophone culture (Montpetit). Despite this important distinction in integration law, it is Ontario, traditionally a central point for immigrants with the large and ethnically varied city of Toronto, that is ‘losing’ the immigration game, with “Quebec and the West scooping up the best and the brightest” (Regg Cohn). Policy in Quebec has been modified in order to make the province more welcoming to

immigrants – and thus other cultures – and it has been successful. Canada as a whole continues to use policy to attract more immigration, and with it comes the strengthening of various cultures within Canada.

In addition to Canada's successful attraction of immigrants through its laws, it is just as important to note that the democratic process is also shaped by the diverse culture. In a broader context, some policy makers have expressed fears that a complex, multiethnic society will have a negative impact on politics and social relations. However, the Harell and Stolle article acknowledges the tendency of multicultural societies to lean towards political tolerance, in both the majority and minority groups, specifically noting the political tolerance and acceptance of speech rights of Canadian youth. The article also notes the trend for policies that recognize cultural diversity to promote open-mindedness and acceptance of 'otherness' (Harell). In this way, the policy is made even more encouraging to potential immigrants, which in turn bolsters the nurturing environment, bringing the policy back full circle. In a similar manner, opportunity begets tolerance, and vice versa. Vanaja Dhruvarajan, in her article titled "People of colour and national identity in Canada," points out that in the early twentieth century, Chinese Canadians were not allowed to bring in their families, or to become full citizens of Canada, out of a fear of Canada becoming 'less white,' the immigrants being most wanted for cheap labour and little else (Dhruvarajan). This is reflected in Denise Chong's memoir The Concubine's Children, in that her grandparents faced many difficulties in the discrimination that was part of the Canadian system. However, after the Chinese had the opportunity to prove themselves, and did, by showing patriotism through their volunteering for the Second World War, the larger Canadian viewpoint changed. With this adjustment of public opinion, laws such as the Exclusion Act were repealed and Chinese were welcomed more fully into the country (Chong). As a result of multiculturalism,

the presence of minority groups has altered the way policy is formed in Canada and, in turn, policy strengthens the multicultural presence in Canada.

The practise of multiculturalism, naturally, is directly affected by the policy. For example, Dhruvarajan notes the requirement placed on immigrants for strength in one of the official languages, as well as other factors such as education, are potentially discriminating, especially for women (Dhruvarajan). However, proposals have even recently been made to lessen the current, strict points system that often holds a bias against immigrant women in particular. These changes are proposed largely to lessen the requirement of language – except in the cases of professionals such as doctors, where communication is key – and advanced education, will open the doors wider for immigrants (Keung). Overall, while Dhruvarajan is correct in her allegations that there is still racism, and power inequality in Canada, between visible minorities and the majority, which she defines as white Canada, these contentious issues are being called to attention and addressed even now. Irene Bloemraad’s article “Canada: Multicultural Model or Cautionary Tale?” addresses the concern that multicultural policies do not directly address discrimination themselves, but the article raises the question that must be asked in turn: is the condition of equality in Canada better than it would have been without multicultural policies? While it is impossible to answer with certainty, the implication is that multiculturalism may have improved the Canadian situation (Bloemraad). In addition, with cases such as the accused racism in the Peel school board and new legislation being made to help shift acceptance and power, it is clear that the future will continue to improve for minority groups, allowing them to live to their fullest within Canada.

Apart from the policy of multiculturalism, the practise of this Canadian value is seen through the acceptance of groups, and their lives within Canada. The term multiculturalism, as

previously mentioned, implies no particular dominant culture in Canada – this is a direct result of the multicultural practise, as immigrants from increasingly diverse backgrounds integrate into the Canadian life and make their mark there. In the attached photo, a clear example of integrated multiculturalism is shown. It depicts a small French café called Espresso Etc., in Toronto's Chinatown (drastically modernized compared to the Chinatowns recounted in Chong's memoirs, which she notes to have been given a 'new face' after 1967 (Chong)), in the heart of the city and across from the Art Gallery of Ontario. This restaurant, located in a thriving Chinese neighbourhood in Ontario's capital, clearly has a French theme, displayed prominently on the awnings above its windows and is, in addition, named after a widely popular Italian beverage. Above the signs for the store itself, clear and prominent Chinese letting is displayed on the floor above (as well as more Chinese print visible next to the door of the shop itself); the sign is for a Chinese immigrant congregation, where people gather to write about poetry and drama.<sup>1</sup> Combining two languages – Chinese and English – and several cultures, this café represents a key theme of Canadian multiculturalism: the ability of Canadians, regardless of ethnicity, to experience and enjoy other cultures. As well, not far from Toronto's Chinatown is one of its major malls, the Eaton Centre, where, just shortly after this photo was taken, a group of Muslim men paused to face Qibla and pray, with other patrons of the mall paying them no heed, allowing them to practise their religion in peace. Just as the coffee shop in Chinatown does, this experience echoes the practised multiculturalism in Toronto, just a fraction of what is experienced in the country as a whole. Through the existence of different cultures and religions in Canada, multiculturalism is evident – these cultures are able to thrive and to experience one another.

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<sup>1</sup> A special thanks to Kelly Lui and Beatrix Kau for assistance with the translation.

In addition, these cultures are accepted, and even welcomed, in Canadian society, where multiculturalism means that they are protected and valued as part of the Canadian entirety. In the Canadian model a sense of trust and belonging, that would be absent in many other systems, is part of the multicultural fact. While Dhruvarajan comments that “even third generation Chinese Canadians still seek ‘a place to belong’” (Dhruvarajan, 5), this is contradicted by an article printed recently in the Toronto Star. The author, Florence Li, herself an Asian Canadian from Hong Kong, explains her feeling of being ‘caught’ between the two cultures and worlds – Chinese and ‘Western’ – and yet she boldly proclaims to feeling most comfortable in Toronto. She explains that “it’s not that Toronto is better; it’s that I like myself better when I am here. I belong here” (Li, E5). As a minority immigrant, especially having spent most of her life now in Canada, she feels most at home in the multicultural society that exists here. Similarly, author Judy Fong-Bates, on a CBC panel from 2004, who did not grow up in a Chinese community, explains that she feels she is lucky to live in Canada because “Canada is a country that accepts so many different cultures,” and that it allows those cultures to evolve and produce what is ‘Canadian’ (“A Changing Identity”). Both women, despite their mixed cultural background, enjoy the acceptance and belonging that they feel Canada extends to them and to other minority groups.

This sense of welcoming accommodation in Canada inevitably leads to the ever important sense of belonging. Bloemraad, in her article, comments that “for some, Canada epitomizes the successful accommodation of diversity” (Bloemraad, 309). Implicit in this commentary is that Canada not only accommodates, but accepts diversity, giving immigrants the sense of belonging that is due with a truly multicultural society. Furthermore, the article reports on the findings by the Ethnic Diversity Survey that 80 percent of respondents indicated a strong

sense of belonging within Canada. Bloemraad also notes that, contrary to findings in other countries, the findings in Canada indicate that diversity is positively correlated with trust – that is to say that in areas with a wider range of diversity, people have a tendency to trust one another (both those inside and out of their particular ethnic groups) more fully than in more homogeneous regions. Furthermore, this contrasts Dhruvarajan’s concerns about discrimination, with Bloemraad’s article suggesting that trust is the opposite of prejudice (Bloemraad). Even in the Harell and Stolle article, which focuses on more negative reports of diversity-trust correlation, especially in other countries, there is an acknowledgement that Canadian policies seem to diminish this effect, and that contact with certain ethnic groups has the potential to reduce discrimination towards others (Harell). Trust is invariably related to the idea of acceptance, thus contributing to the welcoming sense of belonging within Canada, and to the overall success of multiculturalism.

For immigrants such as Li, the reason for their sense of belonging in Canada is inherently tied to their ability to reconcile both their heritage and their ‘Canadian’ identity. Li in particular references Professor Elaine Kim's concept that Asian Americans occupy a ‘third space,’ that they are in an in-between state: “as Asian Canadians... we are neither Asian, nor Canadian, and yet... we are both Asian and Canadian” (Li, E5). Li continues, explaining how this affects her sense of self and belonging within Canada, and that she is able to occupy that ‘space,’ and be “whatever and whoever [she wants] to be” (Li, E5). It is this ability to merge both aspects of her culture that make her feel most comfortable in Canada. Once again, Fong-Bates echoes her experience, describing herself as living as “neither fish nor fowl” within Canada, which she describes as “a country of hybrids,” where culture is evolving. She considers herself Canadian in that she is a part of this advanced cross-culture, and she enjoys the experience (“A Changing Identity”). For



Chong's family, her generation, with her brothers and sister, also feels this belonging. They are faced with discrimination at first, when they move to Prince George, teased about their ethnicity, but they soon make friends with the other children, and their race is the least important factor for them: “we ourselves soon forgot that we were any different from our white playmates” (Chong, 251).

Some families become immersed in their combined cultures completely. For the young Chong it is almost surprising at times, but she witnesses and understands her grandmother's continued use of Chinese traditions. At the same time, it is with the Canadian national anthem that her elder sister chooses to teach their 'Po-po,' as they refer to their grandmother, English. The national anthem, a central symbol of Canadian 'identity,' also becomes important for the immigrant family in Anthony De Sa's Barnacle Love. Though fictitious, the family in his novel also experiences the very real cohesion, and occasional conflict, of being attached to two different countries. The father, though certainly with many faults, uses the national anthem obsessively as a symbol of his pride and love for Canada and heralds his appreciation for Trudeau and his policies – but he also clings fiercely to his Portuguese heritage, the Portuguese community he lives in participating in Portuguese culture and traditions all the same (De Sa). Furthermore, in Chong's memoir, the bringing together of her mother's two heritages proves to be a task of the utmost importance. While the family has left behind much of its Chinese heritage, they still feel it is important to regain some of that lost family history. As a result, Chong's mother is able to put her past to rights. Her distant Chinese family and heritage plays just as important a role in her life, even absent, as her Canadian life and family did – the final unity of the two cultures in her family history ultimately allowed her to make sense of her past, the daughter narrating that she had a feeling that “the life we lead begins before, and continues after,

our time.” (Chong, 301). In this way, their heritage is just valued as a part of their identity, just as their Canadian existence now is. In all of these examples, there exists not one culture, but an amalgamation of culture, ‘Canadian’ and others, that combine to create a new identity – diversity and heritage is upheld, welcomed and endorsed, but the experience of exchange of culture that marks multiculturalism arises nonetheless.

Defining multiculturalism as the flourishing existence of diverse cultural societies within Canada, that are able to do so because they are accepted and protected, means that Canada truly is a multicultural society. With multiculturalism and immigration as important and entrenched policies in Canadian law, and minorities feeling like they belong in Canada, Canada is an example of a country where multiculturalism has survived, described by Ibbitson as “the country that embodies the world” (Ibbitson, 212). While, as authors such as Dhruvarajan and instances of discrimination clearly suggest, there are still inequalities to be dealt with, the Canadian example is constantly striving to improve itself and to amend these difficulties. As a country with a foundation of compromise of culture, multiculturalism was the obvious measure, just as it was an important one. While Canada continues to strive to improve itself, it can be assumed that its policy of multiculturalism will grow stronger, not weaker – and that Canada will be among the nations that never have to mourn its passing.

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