IT'S A QUESTION of Identity

WHILE PLANNING FOR THE IDENTITY SEMINAR, A NUMBER OF INTERESTING QUESTIONS WERE RAISED ABOUT THE IDENTITY SEMINAR IN PARTICULAR AND THE SERIES OF SEMINARS ON THE RENEWED MULTICULTURALISM PROGRAM'S STRATEGIC GOALS (CIVIC PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND IDENTITY) IN GENERAL. THESE QUESTIONS, WHILE CATCHING ME OFF-BALANCE AT THE TIME, WARRANT ANSWERS. ANSWERS THAT WILL, I HOPE, BE OF INTEREST TO THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE SEMINAR ITSELF AND TO THOSE INTERESTED PEOPLE WHO HAVE TAKEN THE TIME TO READ THIS MAGAZINE. TO THESE ORIGINAL QUESTIONS (WHY A SEMINAR FOCUSING ON IDENTITY? WHY INVEST IN RESEARCH? AND WHY INVEST IN POLICY-RESEARCH NETWORKS?), I HAVE ADDED A FINAL QUESTION: WHAT NEXT?

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WHY A SEMINAR ON IDENTITY?

In 1996, the Multiculturalism Program at Canadian Heritage was renewed. The streamlined version of the program reoriented what had hitherto been a collection of programs surviving from the dissolution of the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship. This renewed program focused on three strategic goals:

Identity: fostering a society that recognizes and reflects a diversity of cultures such that people of all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Canada.
Civic Participation: developing, among Canada's diverse people, active citizens with both the opportunity and the capacity to participate in shaping the future of their communities and their country.
Social Justice: building a society that ensures fair and equitable treatment and that accommodates and respects the dignity of people of all origins.

The renewal exercise included extensive literature reviews, public opinion surveys, focus groups, consultations, media studies and a close look at the evolution of the program since its inception in 1971.

What became clear over the course of this exercise was that Multiculturalism was a program that had lost its focus. There was confusion over who exactly comprised the core stakeholders. The shift from cultural retention in the 1970s and early 1980s had given way to a focus on race relations in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. In turn, a further evolution towards less essentialist notions of identity at the time of the renewal exercise raised questions about complex and shifting identities. Where did children of mixed origin relationships fit? How would sexual orientation and (dis)ability connect with Multiculturalism? What role could the program play in addressing issues faced by urban Aboriginal peoples?[2] How would these changes be accommodated without expanding to the point where "scope-creep" rendered targeted programs indistinguishable from one another.

The conclusions from the renewal were that as identities became increasingly complex, it was vital to shift away from core grants that funded community-specific non-governmental organizations. It was decided that the most effective way to tackle issues faced by Canadians of diverse backgrounds was to move to project-focused grants that would bring individuals (regardless of their identities) together to tackle issues faced in common. This process has not been easy and in many ways remains ongoing six years later. Building coalitions of interest is time consuming, labour intensive and fraught with difficulties. At the same time, the end result is far more likely to effect systemic change.

What this process did not do was remove identity from the ambit of the Multiculturalism Program. Identity remained as one of the fundamental goals of the program. It remained for a very simple reason: it is important to Canadians – as individuals, as communities of interest and as a collectivity we call Canada. By defining the identity goal as "fostering a society that recognizes and reflects a diversity of cultures such that people of all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Canada," the renewed program moved the Government of Canada in the direction of a more complex understanding of identity – a contingent and ever-changing definition that still causes a great deal of concern in some quarters. It is a concern, especially among older Canadians who have not come to embrace uncertainty with the same equanimity as younger Canadians have done.

Identity is a difficult concept explaining a difficult lived reality. The Multiculturalism Program and its partners decided to tackle the concept with a two-step approach. First was the seminar that this magazine covers. The seminar explored some of the elements of everyday life that help shape our identities: sport, food, culture, immigration, the Internet, religion, commemoration, language, work, education, history, racism / discrimination and political participation / leadership. Each of these areas, and many more, shape who we are as individuals, communities and as a country. There could be many more, but it was felt that this range would expose the complexity of our identities and allow us to focus on under-explored areas. Indeed, this covered the greatest range of multicultural issues in one place since the publishing of J.W. Berry and J.A. Laponce eds. *Ethnicity and Culture in Canada: The Research Landscape*, by the University of Toronto Press in 1994.

The second step would be a seminar exploring the intersections of various identity markers (race, ethnicity, religion, heritage language, gender, (dis)ability, Aboriginal status, official languages, age, socio-economic status, region, sexual orientation); A seminar that will take place in April 2003.[3]

In summary, a seminar on identity was necessary to pull together participants from three levels of government, non-governmental organizations and researchers to more fully comprehend how identity (identities) remains important to Canadians and how it (they) impacts on public policy.

WHY INVEST IN RESEARCH?

The Multiculturalism Program has just celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. In that time, the program has had roughly fifteen Ministers, each with his / her own priorities; it has belonged to four different government departments; and it has faced a consistently high turnover of staff. An optimist can make a case for the importance of this kind of mobility as a multiculturalism diaspora carries diversity concerns across government. A pessimist can argue that it leads to lack of corporate memory, re-inventing the wheel and other amnesiac activities.

Largely speaking, the program has not fallen into the feared instant replay zone, and it has not done so because of the continuity in several communities; not least of which is a cadre of researchers that have been engaged with these issues and, by extension with the program, from its early days.

Along with cultural creators (a topic for another day), researchers act as both the canary on diversity-related issues and the continuity for a Program in constant flux. The advance warning offered by researchers is something that proves invaluable to policy-makers. Equally, the depth of understanding, the context and history of an issue is equally valuable as policy and program responses are envisioned, shaped and implemented.

Successful programs have invested in the canaries that signal change before it comes about and have relationships with researchers that can lead to rapid information exchange when necessary. Over time, these relationships also lead to thoughtful, methodologically sound research results to weigh various options and to guide policy development. In other words, an investment in research is an investment in knowledge-based decision-making, that is, in turn, an important harbinger of success.

WHY INVEST IN RESEARCH NETWORKS?

For six years, I have participated in one of the most innovative research projects I have encountered – the Metropolis Project[4]. This project brings together policy-makers, researchers and NGOs in an ongoing dialogue on immigration and diversity in cities around the world – a dialogue that is greatly enriched by the experiences of practitioners and policy-makers and the knowledge of researchers. It has been tremendously successful by almost any measure, yet this success was not assured then and is not assured now. It hinges on the ability of participants to establish trust in one another and to act collectively.

An oft heard refrain at the existing centres and one I continue to hear in Atlantic Canada, where we are working with a coalition to create an Atlantic Centre, runs as follows: "(Policy-maker) Researchers do not understand our time frames. We need information now, not in three years. (NGO) We know what the problems are. Stop wasting money on research and give it to us; we will fix the problems. (Researcher) NGOs and policy-makers do not understand the complexities of doing research and the sophisticated methodology necessary to yield reliable results." To over simplify,

policy-makers and NGOs don't read (at least not the work published in peer-reviewed journals by researchers) and researchers don't listen (at least not to the concerns of policy-makers and NGOs). There are of course exceptions, but they are exceptions!

After six years of work, the communities of policy-makers, NGOs and researchers at the existing Metropolis Centres have established relationships with one another. Relationships nurtured by face-to-face exchanges that have built significant levels of trust in one another – a store of Putnam's bridging capital. That capital can be spent to tackle particularly intransigent issues that insist upon a collaborative approach.

As mentioned above, there is significant flux in the policy world; flux that will only increase with mass retirements of baby boomers and the consequent opportunities for movement among those too chronologically challenged to retire and / or blessed with youth. The ability of policy-makers to establish networks of contacts in particular issue areas seems destined to decrease rather than increase. Indeed, the same demographic guarantees high turnovers in research and NGO communities as well. Networks promise to provide some long-term stability. These networks provide a means for a passing of the knowledge torch from one generation to the next, thus ensuring that the lessons of hard-won successes and noteworthy failures are not lost.

Given the commonality of interest, the networks are inexpensive to maintain and yield high returns to those involved. Examples include Metropolis in general, but also more focused networks like the Citizenship Education Research Network (CERN), the Political Participation Research Network (PPRN) and the nascent Religion in the Metropolis Network (RithM)[5].

In sum, research networks provide the skeleton that provides continuity across personnel changes in key institutions. They provide the frame that can connect communities of interest and magnify the impact of community development projects that too often sink from sight without transferring past practices to other communities.

SO WHAT? / WHAT NEXT?

An activity like the identity seminar leaves behind a "paper" trail that can be explored at a future date by historians or even by auditors! At the same time, it leaves much less tangible, but perhaps more valuable, trails in the connections forged and in the broadening of individual and collective thinking on particular topics and the promise of future partnerships.

There is a rich "paper" trail from this event. There are literature reviews of both French and English language literature on identity, available in either language, thus bridging distances caused by language barriers. There is a database of identity research that will shortly find its way on to the Internet as a research tool for everyone interested. There are challenge papers on a broad range of topics posted on-line. Versions of selected papers have been published in a special issue of the journal of *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, less academic summaries are available in this magazine.

The connections and future partnerships are harder to nail down. That said, there was a workshop on food and identity at the Sixth International Metropolis Conference in Rotterdam (2001). The papers were used by at least one graduate seminar at the University of Calgary to challenge students to think about identity broadly. The seminar on intersections of diversity in April 2003 will build on this work and broaden it further. Large-scale research projects on religion and diversity, as well as the media and diversity, are in planning stages by Paul Bramadat at the University of Winnipeg and Minelle Mahtani at the University of British Columbia. It has been mentioned that the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC) is considering a strategic grant competition in the area of identity for the fall of 2002. The work of participants in the seminar has influenced the work of the shared citizenship secretariat and other activities of the Canadian Identity Directorate at Canadian Heritage. Solid research domains on citizenship and identity, religion and culture, and language have been proposed for the Atlantic Metropolis Centre, which is under development. Thinking around the seminar contributed to the development of the survey instrument for the ethnic diversity survey. There will be more, especially in the wake of the intersections seminar, that should lead to the establishment of several policy-research networks.

In conclusion, the "paper" trail from the seminar, of which this magazine is a part, acts as a signpost to connect newcomers to emerging networks of common interest. The more intangible connections also contribute to the development of these networks. This fills the kind of canary-esque function that I mentioned earlier. As policy-makers, practitioners and researchers continue to grapple with how to deal with the complex identities of Canadians, Canadian communities and Canada as a country, this seminar and the connections it nurtured will equip us all to foster "a society that recognizes and reflects a diversity of cultures, such that people of all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Canada."

[1] The views expressed here are those of the author and not those of the Metropolis Project or Citizenship and Immigration Canada. John Biles was one of the research officers at the Multiculturalism Program until June 2001. His responsibilities included the seminar series discussed here. As the Metropolis Project Team was a core partner for the identity seminar, he participated at the identity seminar and is a member of many of the policy-research networks that emerged from the seminars.

[2] To further complicate issues, following the events of September 11, 2001, the lack of knowledge about religion in Canada has signalled a possible additional shift of multicultural concerns in Canada.

[3] See http://www.acs-aec.ca for more information.

[4] For more information see http://www.metropolis.net

[5] For more information select "policy research" off the main Canadian page on the network of Metropolis websites: http://www.canada.metropolis.net