50 YEARS OF CANADIAN MULTICULTURALISM: A RIDDLE, A MYSTERY, AN ENIGMA

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INTRODUCTION: A MIXED MILESTONE

Fifty years of official multiculturalism puts pressure on reassessing its role and worth as a Canadian icon (Paikin 2021; Adams 2021; Cardozo 2021). Despite international praise and domestic popularity, Canada's official multiculturalism continues to receive a mixed assessment that amplifies its ambiguous status as a solution in search of a problem. Multicultural success stories are offset by program failures; its popularity conceals substantial pockets of indifference or resentment; and its impact is not nearly as progressive or comprehensive as widely believed. The ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies that inform 50 years of Canada's official multiculturalism point to the necessity of a discursive reassessment (Fleras 2021a). Instead of framing multiculturalism in the language of "is" or "ought", or around the binaries of "good" or "bad", perhaps it's time to reframe it around its puzzling and paradoxical dimensions as both progressive and transformative, yet also contradictory and obfuscatory (also Barrett 2015). When searching for a turn of phrase that captures multiculturalism's complexities and contradictions without falling into the trap of carping negativity or fatuous platitudes, what comes to mind is Winston Churchill's oft-quoted assessment of pre-Second World War Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." Framing an official multiculturalism along similar lines – as a riddle, a mystery, and an enigma – yields a new interpretative lens that offers fresh insights into a stale topic. What is the meaning of an official Canadian multiculturalism ("riddle")? How does it work ("mystery")? Has it made a difference in remaking Canada ("enigma")? In short, the deeper we delve into the murky depths of Canada's official multiculturalism as minority governance and diversity management, the greater the urge to refract it through a prism that conveys its mixed and messy status.

CANADIAN MULTICULTURALISM AS RIDDLE: WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?

Canada may be the world's quintessential multicultural society (Guo and Wong 2015). Yet successive Canadian governments have never tried to define an official multiculturalism for the benefit of the general public (Thurairajah 2017). Any reference to multiculturalism reflects a largely unplanned and ad hoc trajectory bereft of conceptual clarity or ideological precision – a situation that, paradoxically, may work to Canada's advantage (Kymlicka 2015). Multiculturalism rarely means what it says or says what it really means ("polysemous"); as a result, it can mean everything ("a floating signifier") yet nothing ("an empty signifier") (B'beri and Mansouri 2014), or whatever the context allows it to mean ("a sliding signifier") (Hall 2017). Misperceptions abound because the term itself remains

a misnomer. For example, an official multiculturalism is not about making Canada more multicultural and diverse, as implied by the term "multi" + "cultures". Rather it's about making it more inclusive through minority accommodation and migrant integration in ways doable, necessary, and fair. A commitment to multiculturalism is not about supporting expressions of cultural diversity but of precluding them in public to abort the possibility of messy ethnic entanglements. Consider how Canada's multicultural model eschews the promotion of differences, preferring, instead, to *depoliticize* diversity by channelling it into harmless outlets. Nor is it about promoting ethnicity per se. The rationale behind an official multiculturalism is to capitalize on peoples' ethnodiversity as a stepping stone to facilitate their integration on terms that work for them. In saying one thing but doing something else, an official multiculturalism exemplifies a classic case of *double talk*. Canada may be at the forefront in consolidating a principled multicultural society. Yet, paradoxically, it also epitomizes one of the world's most successful integration regimes (Rao 2007).

MULTICULTURALISM AS MYSTERY: IS IT WORKING?

Considering multiculturalism as a mystery triggers a set of questions that elude any simple response. Is an official multiculturalism working? Who says so? For whose benefit? Does it work to improve the settlement and integration of newcomers to Canada or, alternatively, to whitewash a largely racialized status quo, with its prevailing distribution of power and privilege? On what grounds can such an assessment be made? Is success even measurable? If multiculturalism is a causal factor in a multicultural makeover of Canada, is it possible to disaggregate it from the mix to determine its input? Will a state-centric multiculturalism continue to work with the onset of a more unruly and contested post-multicultural world (Fleras 2019)? Finding answers to those difficult questions constitutes the mystery of Canadian multiculturalism.

For some, reference to "it works" is reflected in the popularity and support of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism works by advancing a Canada that no longer openly champions the primacy of a white supremacist society, rejects flagrant expressions of racism and discrimination, espouses respect for cultural differences, and endorses principles of inclusion (Cardozo 2021; Adams 2021). For others, multiculturalism works in Canada but rarely elsewhere because it represents a low-risk option for integrating migrants and accommodating minorities, most of whom have arrived through legal channels, possess liberal values, and are labour-ready for participation in the modern economy (Kymlicka 2012). Others still find multiculturalism works because it legitimizes a racialized-in-whiteness social order by concealing those uncomfortable truths that conveniently whitewash a monocultural regime (Bannerji 2000). Still others believe multiculturalism works because it keeps Canada afloat by depoliticizing the potency of diversity to fragment, divide, or ghettoize (Fleras 2019). To complicate matters, minority perceptions of what works differ from the mainstream. For example, new Canadians may perceive multiculturalism as a platform for maintaining multiple identities, including an involvement in homeland politics. Yet this perception may be dismissed as un-Canadian by the mainstream who insist newcomers park their past at Pier 21 (figuratively speaking) as the price of admission into Canada (Thurairajah 2017).

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Fifty years of multiculturalism as official policy have made one thing abundantly clear: we don't fully understand how or why it works. Yes, multiculturalism may be associated with the transformation of Canada along more inclusive lines, yet its overall impact has proven difficult to measure except, perhaps, to make Canadians more self-consciously aware of Canada as a multicultural domain. Positives associated with an official multiculturalism may reflect other factors such as:

- the internationalization of human rights agenda;
- a progressive and highly selective immigration program that admits the brightest and best;
- a commitment to aggressively pursue the settlement and integration of newcomers; and
- relatively open pathways to citizenship through naturalization (Hansen 2017).

Or, if multiculturalism is acclaimed for creating a more inclusive and equitable society, such an assessment may tap into Canada's status as one of the world's most immigrant-friendly countries (US News 2021). Perhaps its true value lies in fostering a social climate that, not only endorses diversity initiatives in general (Adams and Omidvar 2018), but also legitimizes a controlled immigration program that works to Canada's advantage (Fleras 2014; Hansen 2017). Popular support for multiculturalism equips immigration policy-makers with considerable latitude ("political capital") in implementing immigrant policies and settlement programs, without fear of public criticism or electoral backlash (Reitz 2014). The conclusion seems inescapable. Any claim of success for an official multiculturalism may be spurious and correlational rather than causal and direct, nearly impossible to measure, or

difficult to operationalize except in terms so vague as to border on baseless.

MULTICULTURALISM AS AN ENIGMA: HAS IT BEEN WORTH IT?

Has 50 years of official multiculturalism had an appreciable impact on Canada and Canadians? Responses tend to polarize. For some, Canada has evolved into a truly multicultural society that abides by the principles of multiculturalism, despite some lingering monocultural residues from past. For others, Canada remains a predominantly monocultural regime, despite a half-century of multiculturalism, with a few multicultural bits thrown in for good measure to foster the illusion of inclusion? Aligning responses along this continuum contribute to the enigma that is multiculturalism.

> "While many regard multiculturalism as a catalyst in advancing a more equitable Canada, in reality, many racialized minorities are inclined to disagree as they struggle with the inequalities of exclusion, alongside an amplification of anti-Black racism, anti-Asian pandemic-related hate, Islamophobic violence, and continuing anti-Semitism."

Consensus is lacking in deciding whether 50 years of official multiculturalism has proved a deal breaker. To one side, a multicultural Canada in 2021 is positively different from the Canada that prevailed in the decades prior to 1971 (Paikin 2021). Open expressions of racism are no longer acceptable under an official multiculturalism, diversity is sourced as Canada's strength, minorities and migrants are confirmed as integral to Canada-building, a commitment to multiculturalism is central to national identity, and mainstream institutions increasingly accept a duty to accommodate (Adams 2021; Cardozo 2021). To the other side, 50 years of multiculturalization has made little difference in reconfiguring Canadian society. Canada may be more multicultural in lip-service, add-ons, and window dressing, yet it remains rooted in the monocultural assumptions of white supremacy, the foundational principles of a Eurocentric constitutional order (Fleras 2021b), and the fundamental duality of its French-English core (Haque 2012). True, multiculturalism as an aspirational ideal may commit to a rethinking of what Canada is and what it means to be Canadian. Nevertheless, the monoculturalism of a settled whiteness continues to blanket the national agenda in defining what is normal, right, and desirable. Finally, while many regard multiculturalism as a catalyst in advancing a more equitable Canada, in reality, many racialized minorities are inclined to disagree as they struggle with the inequalities of exclusion (Block and Galabuzi 2018; Fleras 2017), alongside an amplification of anti-Black racism, anti-Asian pandemic-related hate, Islamophobic violence, and continuing anti-Semitism (CRRF 2021).

CONCLUSION: A RECKONING WITH MULTICULTURALISM

Let's problematize 50 years of Canadian multiculturalism as diversity discourse and governance framework. Applying the lens of a riddle/mystery/enigma nexus to an analysis and evaluation of official multiculturalism exposes how the idea and the practice are more contested and contradictory than widely perceived. Championed yet maligned, idealized as well as demonized, official multiculturalism simultaneously evokes a multifaceted preference for change yet stasis; of conformity yet diversity; of control yet emancipation; of exclusion yet participation; of hegemony yet resistance. Neither the benefits nor the costs of multiculturalism should be underappreciated in any analysis or assessment. As Paul Barrett (2015:9) points out, reframing multiculturalism in terms of its "simultaneously disabling and enabling quality" empowers activists with leeway and legitimacy to call out Canada for not living up to its obligations, thus reflecting the ability of the powerless to repurpose the very tools of control into levers of resistance and change.

> "Multiculturalism as a progressive tool as well as an instrument of division and danger – ups the ante for a more nuanced analysis than many are willing to concede. Canadian multiculturalism as a political project for engaging minorities and managing diversity should not be discursively framed as an either/or proposition. More value can be gleaned by framing it as a both/and discourse – namely, as a platform for resistance and oppression as well as a resource for reform and repression – with a capacity to generate positive social changes, yet simultaneously reproduce the very conditions that necessitated the change in the first place."

Such a mixed assessment – multiculturalism as a progressive tool as well as an instrument of division and danger – ups the ante for a more nuanced analysis than many are willing to concede. Canadian multiculturalism as a political project for engaging minorities and managing diversity should not be discursively framed as an either/or proposition. More value can be gleaned by framing it as a both/and discourse – namely, as a platform for resistance and oppression as well as

a resource for reform and repression – with a capacity to generate positive social changes, yet simultaneously reproduce the very conditions that necessitated the change in the first place. An official multiculturalism may be slow in advancing the ideal of a lived inter-existence (Fleras 2019), yet it also embodies a work in progress in advancing innovative possibilities for living together differently (Ghosh 2011). Assessing 50 years of official multiculturalism as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma provides a timely reminder of how the idea of multiculturalism as governance may be mined for new insights that shed light on old orthodoxies.

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