MULTICULTURALISM: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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The 50th anniversary of Canadian multiculturalism coincides with a pandemic that has exacerbated racism and inequality globally. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres argued in 2020 that the COVID-19 pandemic had unleashed "a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering" (United Nations 2020). Although the vaccine rollout in countries of the global North was deemed a success by April 2021, vaccine inequity is projected to impact the global South for years (Katz et al., 2021).

Fifty years of official multiculturalism has not insulated Canadians from racism, hate and inequity. A 2020 Angus Reid survey of Canadians of Chinese origin found 63% had been called names or insulted during the pandemic, 43% had been threatened, and merely 13% felt others consistently saw them as Canadian (Zeidler, 2020). There is no question that the pandemic has amplified deep-rooted inequities and injustices in Canada, feeding an "inequality virus" in health and earnings that negatively impacts women and racialized minorities (Liaqat, 2021). The stories and studies abound. They include the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Filipino-Canadians working in jobs deemed essential in the pandemic and living in multigenerational homes (Bascaramurty and Grant, 2021), the higher COVID-19 mortality rates in neighbourhoods with concentrations of racialized ("visible") minorities (Subedi et al., 2020), as well as the higher mortality rates amongst younger immigrants, especially males (Ng, 2021). They also include the job losses experienced particularly by racialized women (Saba, 2021), and the difficulties within many First Nations communities lacking clean water and space trying to meet public health recommendations like handwashing and isolation (Canada, 2021:3).

From the present vantage point of such stark contemporary realities it is poignant to ask what promise, if any, multiculturalism holds for Canada? To answer this question, I will proceed by looking backward and projecting forward. As it enters its sixth decade, multiculturalism in Canada is far from a perfected policy. However, there is tremendous potential for creatives – both in civil society and government – to advance new policy ideas and responses that may foster more equitable outcomes in keeping with multiculturalism's promise.

LOOKING BACKWARD: MULTICULTURALISM'S HISTORY

On October 8, 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau announced a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework of English and French. While largely a symbolic policy, it did also signal Canada's embrace of a more inclusionary model of citizenship, as compared to the founding of the modern Canadian state in 1867 and its history as a white settler-colony (Abu-Laban, 2020). Such settler colonies are

characterized by complex and unequal relations around race, ethnicity, class, language, region, gender and other forms of differentiation, owing to having a pre-existing Indigenous population and repeated waves of immigration (Stasiulis and Davis, 1995).

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As a "white settler colony," Canada was modelled after Great Britain politically, economically, culturally, linguistically and even demographically when it came to who was considered the ideal immigrant and citizen (Stasiulis and Jhappan, 1995). As a consequence, for the greater part of Canada's history, immigration policy was overtly racially discriminatory and the prevailing policy practices and ethos stressed Anglo-conformity (Abu-Laban, 2014). This meant that all minority groups – whether Francophone, Indigenous or immigrant – were to adapt to the culture of the dominant British-origin group.

When Canada moved to embrace a more inclusionary framework of identity, belonging and citizenship through multiculturalism, it did so on the heels of the trauma of World War II. In the 1950s and 1960s, there arose new demands from within civil society alongside novel ways of thinking, including regarding the role of governments and the treatment of people. Internationally, there occurred the rise of the human rights revolution. Furthermore, decolonizing movements were achieving success by the 1950s (Abu-Laban, 2018).

In Canada, having an immigration policy that was overtly racially discriminatory was not tenable. In fact, by the early 1960s, and more decisively with the adoption of the point system of selection in 1967, the overt racial discrimination that had governed Canada's immigration policy historically was rejected. In Canada, as in other states, there was the advancement of the welfare state and universal healthcare, while minorities were notably also making demands for greater autonomy and fairness. This was evident in the resurgence of Quebecois nationalism in the early 1960s, which prompted the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. It was apparent in Indigenous claims and responses to the 1967 bicentennial and assimilative aspects of the 1969 White Paper (dealing with "Indian Policy"). Demands for greater fairness also manifested in the challenges raised by second-wave feminists and groups like Ukrainian-Canadians in Alberta who felt that a bicultural understanding of Canada did not account for their contributions (Abu-Laban, 2018; 2020).

All of these claims from civil society were important to the emergence of a different kind of Canadian citizenship – one which had a social dimension. And further still, in 1971 when Canada became the first country in the world to introduce a federal policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework, it also took on a multicultural or pluralist dimension that moved beyond the older Anglo-conformity towards a more inclusionary model. This multicultural citizenship allowed disempowered groups like women and ethnocultural minorities to make claims on the basis of their Canadian citizenship (Abu-Laban, 2014; 2018).

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This kind of inclusionary and pluralist model for citizenship, identity and belonging also made its way into the highest law of the land. *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* balances between supporting the rights of Canadians as individuals and recognition of the multicultural heritage of Canadians (Section 27), and rights of official language minorities (Sections 16–23). Additionally, Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* recognizes and affirms existing Aboriginal rights.

Multiculturalism along with these elements of a pluralist citizenship provides a *necessary* base for belonging and solidarity within the Canadian context. However, the pandemic has both thrown a light on and exacerbated social inequities lurking beneath the inclusionary model of citizenship that Canada has come to embrace. What the pandemic has clearly shown us is that this base is *not sufficient* for resolving inequities and injustices experienced by specific groups, which have very deep roots in Canada's historic formation as a settler colony.

LOOKING FORWARD: MULTICULTURALISM'S PROMISE

COVID-19 has clearly intensified inequities relating to Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and racialized minorities in ways that have class and gender dimensions. Canada's multiculturalism policy has never dealt with socioeconomic inequalities, and only in the 1980s, as a result of pressures from racialized minorities, was racism mentioned. Even then, its centrality has varied by government; for instance, the Conservatives under Stephen Harper were decidedly reluctant to take up anti-racism (Abu-Laban, 2014, also see Carlaw in this volume).

Can multiculturalism be emboldened? In fact, there are signs of heightened societal and policy-based understanding of inequities, as well as experience with change that may help

potentiate the pluralist model of citizenship underpinning multiculturalism policy. Such new ideas, conversations, and ways of thinking are reminiscent of what led to multiculturalism in the first place.

First, there is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), whose calls to action urge Canadians, all levels of governments, and institutions ranging from universities to museums, to reflect on what an ongoing process of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples may mean in terms of practices (TRC 2015). The 2015 calls to action have yet to be fully implemented. Nonetheless, there is a shift in educational institutions, such as universities, that is remarkable for fostering new discussions and understandings that echoes in the popular culture. Given Canada's historic foundation as a settler colony, the fact that this is happening is promising for challenging deep-rooted practices of colonialism and systemic racism. This is relevant for reconciliation, as well for a more solidaristic multiculturalism.

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Second, there is a much more pronounced awareness of racialized inequities and discrimination and their everyday forms as microaggressions, as well as how these may intersect with other forms of difference like gender. Before the pandemic, in 2019, a new federal secretariat of anti-racism was established, aiming to take a "whole-of-government" approach across federal agencies to address the impacts of policies, services and programs (See Canada, Canadian Heritage, 2021:13). The federal anti-racism strategy for 2019–2022 mirrors developments in civil society. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, there were not only demonstrations in support of Black Lives Matter, but there was a veritable explosion of interest in anti-racism and social justice along with deep introspection. As one example, this is indicated in the sales of anti-racism and social justice books, which jumped by 955% between May and June of 2020. Bulk purchase orders of anti-racism and social justice themed books by educators, non-profit organizations and companies continued over 2020 (CBCRadio, 2021).

Third, and not least, we have all shown how much we can change in this pandemic. It is difficult to think of any Canadian institution – from the family to government – that has not been impacted by social distancing and digitalization. The aftermath of World War II ushered in dramatic changes. Similarly, with the pandemic, we are at another worldwide watershed moment, where we are confronted by life and death issues and forced to adapt. The pandemic has revealed the many ways in which there are real and disheartening inequities. But we are also engaging in reflective thinking and in conversations that are novel. Consequently, the prospects for a multiculturalism that is more solidaristic and equitable are before us.

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