Social Confusion:
The Decline of 'Cohesionism' in Canada and its Lessons for the Study of Citizenship

Jack Jedwab
Executive Director of the Association for Canadian Studies

It is common in the realm of policy-making to develop a common language or shared discourse in the pursuit of societal objectives. In western societies, democracy, equality, human rights and pluralism have been amongst the dominant social goals of the last half of the twentieth century and are widely considered as fundamental in the pursuit of the public good. Large bodies of literature have been constructed around these themes and hence they have had considerable influence in shaping much of the contemporary public policy discourse.

Over the course of the 1990's related goals and connected concepts have increasingly become the object of public policy discourse. An engaged citizenship, good governance and social cohesion were frequently referred to as priorities for policy deliberation. Promoting both diversity and shared values have also given rise to the introduction of a wide range of government initiatives. While some objectives are more easily defined than others there is always a challenge in attempting to introduce policy frameworks around very lofty objectives. Some concepts are so far reaching that they do not easily lend themselves to policy formulation.

Neither academics nor policy-makers are immune to conceptual fads and the recent excitement over the concept of social cohesion provides a good example. Social cohesion attained the status of 'buzzphrase' before it ever met the test of conceptualization. The term was employed by many a decision maker in Canada however uncertain they were to either its meaning or consequence. A certain status seemed bestowed upon those attending one of the national capital's many get-togethers to discuss social cohesion. Several think tanks and funding agencies got on board the social cohesion bandwagon and provided support for all kinds of studies that employed the concept. What once seemed to be dialogue over the challenges of democracy and pluralism were really debates about social cohesion. Notwithstanding the cohesion craze amongst some academics and policy-makers, the term never captured the broader public's imagination and not surprisingly is now used more sparingly.

Over the past few years the concept of social cohesion came under close scrutiny from such respected thinkers as sociologist Paul Bernard and political theorist Will Kymlicka. The latter rightly points out that social cohesion has become a catch-all term for a wide range of often unconnected phenomena. In its maximal form, social cohesion means something like a "harmonious" society, in which people cherish each other's identities and differences, and in which there are no conflicts or misunderstandings or fears related to ethnic diversity. Kymlicka adds that: "...the multiculturalism policy in Canada has certainly not produced such a society, but in his view, this sort of "harmony" in not only unrealistic, but inappropriate as a goal of public policy."

For his part in his 1999 essay entitled "Social Cohesion: a Critique" Paul Bernard rightly points to the tensions among the three contending values of solidarity, equality, and liberty that are hard to reconcile under the social cohesion paradigm. However the thoughtful criticism of the notion of social cohesion - that he refers to as a quasi-concept- is transformed by 'cohesionists' into a constructive contribution that builds directly upon their efforts to map the idea.

No Definition Required?

Although social cohesion is a notion that originates with the work of Emile Durkheim its most recent incarnation is linked to social policy development in the European community. Canadian academics thus imported it from their European counterparts. The Conference of European Ministers of Education (Cracow, October 2000) defined social cohesion as an unlimited, multidimensional concept, which seeks to mould society into a coherent – but not homogeneous – whole. It is contended that social cohesion comprises a sense of belonging – to a family, a social group, a neighborhood, a workplace, a country, and even a continent, in this case Europe.

In effect, the European approach to social cohesion is marked by the absence of an explicit or even widely accepted working definition of the term. As such, there is greater consensus about what threatens social cohesion than over that which promotes it. For its part, the OECD has no single, formally agreed-upon definition of social cohesion and, indeed, in much of its recent documentation on this subject has often used the term as if it required none. As one Canadian analyst notes it has

proven difficult to find much descriptive material in documents produced by and for the European Union, the OECD and the Council of Europe on the determinants of a cohesive society.

On the other hand, the Council of Europe, has an extremely broad definition of cohesion – so broad, in fact, that it has separated cohesion into three interrelated categories – democratic cohesion, social cohesion and cultural cohesion. Although, there appears to be no consensus in this literature with regard to factors that promote social cohesion, both the European Union and the Council of Europe agree that solidarity is an important element of European cohesion. However those Canadians referring to the lack of a definition for social cohesion see this as an opportunity to fill a policy vacuum.

The ambiguity of the concept of social cohesion has opened up space for a host of actions by the EU, the OECD and the Council of Europe that loudly proclaim concern with social cohesion despite the conceptual vagueness of the paradigm. Despite the lack of consensus about a definition of social cohesion or about major threats and factors promoting it, the EU, OECD and Council of Europe have undertaken initiatives in the name of cohesion. Some of these are so-called "soft" measures, such as research and consultations, but many are also "hard" measures in the form of legislation, policy and programs.

While the European Committee for Social Cohesion (May 2000) did not define the term, it nonetheless referred to mechanisms and institutions that were set up to prevent the factors of division (such as an excessive gap between rich and poor or the multiple forms of discrimination) from becoming so acute as to endanger social harmony; decent employment; combating poverty and social exclusion, family policy, etc. In short social cohesion is needed to curb divisions within the society.

Paul Bernard stresses that social cohesion is not an unmitigated good. He contends that its "…darker side shows up when cohesion is used to exclude rather than include, for example. It is also true that a society that fragments into a population of disconnected, self-interested individuals can end up making choices which are damaging to the quality of life of both current and future generations." Yet this is precisely one of the problems of the concept. There are many that believe the promotion of this individualism is the key to cohesion and that this risks being jeopardized when the state is too interventionist. In fact underlying the rhetoric of cohesion are different views of the role of the state by those on opposing sides of the ideological spectrum. It is in effect the role of the state that is at the root of the issue with respect to diversity a debate that is often obscured by the focus on cohesion.

Canadian Cohesion

If one can define the issues of cohesion in a manner particular to Europe than it is no doubt possible to have a Canadian version. Social cohesion is described as a major concern of the Government of Canada because of a growing sense among policy makers that the social fabric linking Canada's many overlapping communities may be unraveling. Advocates of the notion maintain that in the past, social cohesion was based, to a large extent, on an unspoken but deeply held belief in Canada as a land of opportunity – a society where Canadians could realize their aspirations and be treated with fairness and dignity. In 1996 the federal government's Policy Research Committee suggested that various fault-lines may be opening, there are growing pressures on social cohesion and as such Canadians' faith in the future of their families, their communities and their country may be eroding. Rarely however is any empirical evidence provided to support this idea and if we are served with data on higher divorce rates or growing income disparities it is deemed unnecessary to explain how this truly affects our sense of cohesion in its qualitative connotation.

Notwithstanding the cohesion craze amongst some academics and policy-makers, the term never captured the broader public's imagination and not surprisingly is now used more sparingly.

One leading Canadian analyst defines social cohesion as the ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians. Having taken us from ambiguity to generality, the federal government's Social Cohesion Project notes that the term continues to evolve as does its definition. Canadian cohesionists note that efforts to define the concept are rare and that it is much more common to deploy the term rather than to define it, to treat it as if "it goes without saying."

Others contend that the term "social cohesion" is used to describe a process more than a condition or end state, while it is seen as involving a sense of commitment, and desire or capacity to live together in some harmony. Social cohesion clearly indicates that problems arise when institutions, particularly public institutions, fail to manage conflicts over recognition, legitimacy of claims and do not provide sufficient space for democratic dialogue. Again over the past decade rarely has anything empirical been offered to elucidate cause and effect when it comes to social cohesion.

Under the heading dimensions of social cohesion is the juxtaposition of belonging and isolation; inclusion and exclusion; participation and non-involvement; recognition and rejection and legitimacy and illegitimacy. Of course this dialectic involves assumptions about what contributes to cohesion that requires a more precise definition of the concept. What is legitimate for some may be illegitimate for others and recognition of some may result in feelings of rejection for others. In effect what is cohesive for some may be less than cohesive for others. Other issues connected to the study of social cohesion are the capacity to construct a collective identity and a sense of belonging; a society's commitment and capacity to assure equality of opportunity by including all its citizens and reducing marginality. However in the name of social cohesion the state can suggest diametrically

different actions purportedly aimed at reducing marginality. Social cohesion is also discussed in relation to democratic practices, including patterns of participation, and the legitimacy of representative institutions such as advocacy groups, political parties, unions and governments. 'Cohesionists' frequently refer to legitimacy without giving answers as to what or who would be responsible for conferring such status.

Those seeking clarity on the meaning of the concept of social cohesion will no doubt be baffled by the mapping exercise commissioned by the Canadian Policy Research Networks. The 'kafkaesque' title '*Can Social Cohesion Be a Threat to Social Cohesion?*' is followed by a proposed research agenda that includes: can citizens' identities be both varied and multiple, without threatening social cohesion, or is adherence to a single national vision necessary?; are the mechanisms and institutions needed to create a balance between social justice and social cohesion in place?; whose belongingness and recognition is being maximized?; Do recipients of community services derive the same benefits as volunteer provides or do they experience a loss of citizenship status?

Limiting Cohesion

Both in Canada and in Europe 'cohesionists' have exhibited a particular preoccupation with the impact of diversity on the society. By diversity they presumably imply multiple attachments and identification that they suspect are a problem for social cohesion. Ironically it is a matter that unites persons of opposing ideologies. The Council of Europe notes that the dangers of a divided society are clear and evident. The pursuit of social cohesion is thus an important aspect of the Council of Europe's efforts to strengthen human dignity and social rights in a spirit of solidarity.

A Council of Europe report contends, "integration of immigrants and national minorities is one of the pillars of social cohesion" (September 2000). Three issues on which to pursue the challenges for diversity and cohesion in Europe have been identified as solidarity, not only within the societies, but also between countries; good governance and the empowering of immigrants and minorities so that they might address their specific problems in partnership with governments and other actors; finally, there is multiple affiliation which consists in going beyond legal definitions, of, for example, citizenship and focusing rather on social acceptance of multiple affiliation due to circular migration or to intermarriages. Although many cohesionists would disagree with the last two recommendations they nonetheless represent a more progressive vision for minority communities than some Canadians advocates of cohesion have provided when discussing the challenge of managing diversity. In 1996 an important strategic report on Canada's multicultural policy commissioned by the Department of Canadian Heritage notes with concern that: 'the emphasis on multiculturalism might increase cultural group identification at the expense of Canadian social cohesion.' It asks under what circumstances that multiculturalism might threaten "social cohesion"? The report concludes that: "…there is a discomfort that multiculturalism programs have not met the ideals and goals that many hold for it, there is also widespread support for an emphasis on cultural diversity as part of an integrated, cohesive Canadian society based upon the values and norms that Canadians share."

The federal government's Social Cohesion Network has explored this under the theme of "What Will Hold Us Together?" Elsewhere a conference held in October 2001 entitled 'The Limits to Diversity?' purports to focus on the point at which diversity in a community undermines its social cohesion and how to ensure social cohesion within a multi-cultural citizenship? The underlying assumption is that a multicultural citizenship interferes with cohesion further reinforces the idea that certain forms of identification render problematic this yet ill-conceived goal.

What is legitimate for some may be illegitimate for others and recognition of some may result in feelings of rejection for others. In effect what is cohesive for some may be less than cohesive for others.

Fortunately, the Department of Canadian Heritage no longer takes this approach. As Kymlicka notes, "…there always will be tensions and disagreements over how best to accommodate diversity. To hope that these disagreements will disappear is as inappropriate as hoping that disagreements over the economy will disappear. Indeed, part of what it means to accept multiculturalism is to accept that people hold different conceptions of the good life which are, to some extent, in competition with each other. So accepting multiculturalism entails rejecting the fantasy of "harmony", which can only be achieved by suppressing our real diversity."

He concludes that "…if social cohesion is defined minimally as a consensus on peaceful democratic procedures, then multiculturalism has not threatened it; and if it is defined maximally as "harmony", then it is a fantasy that is not worth pursing."

Difference and cohesion are not on opposing ends of some dialectical spectrum. Less demographic diversity has not implied more social harmony in several parts of the world. Moreover pluralistic societies can simultaneously value difference while sharing basic commitments to for example a democratic system of government. In democratic societies citizens possess multiple identities and attachments. Very often it is the failure to recognize this and accommodate it when necessary that is detrimental to intergroup relations and so-called cohesion.

Studying Citizenship: The Lessons from Cohesionism

There are valuable lessons to drawn for the current enthusiasm over the study of citizenship from the continued decline in the use of the social cohesion paradigm amongst academics and policy-makers. In the past decade there has been a virtual explosion of studies dealing with citizenship. What was previously referred to as Charter rights has often been repackaged as the rights of citizens, relations between groups has become part of 'citizens relations', studies of

poverty are described by some analysts as the socio-economic challenges of citizens, voluntarism and voting are either citizenship participation or civic engagement and so on and so forth. None of this detracts from the considerable work that provides interesting and thoughtful insights into numerous issues under the citizenship paradigm. However there is a risk that the transformation of the study of citizenship into the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary concept that is so far reaching risks seriously obscuring its value for the academic and policy-making community.

For example the idea that we are citizens above all else may detract from the importance of economic, social and cultural difference amongst the population. Moreover where the use of the term citizens becomes a euphemism for the notion of the ordinary citizen and/or a concept designed to tell us what the masses think several methodological problems emerge.

A more recent example of this appears in the *'Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future: A 21st Century Social Contract'*. In this study the term citizens substitutes for Canadians as it embarks on a series of generalizations based on random selection of interviewees that participated in a series of workshops across the country-a series of citizens forums. Before embarking on a set of generalizations arising from these consultations the authors of the report contend that randomly selecting participants is more valuable than the top-of -mind public opinion analysis that does not offer the opportunity for reflection in what are undoubtedly a series of guided discussions. This despite the fact that public opinion polling respects the demographic realities of the Canadian population whereas random selection pays insufficient attention to this necessary pre-condition for gauging national opinion. Many an open-line talk show purports to represent the voice of citizens through random selection of audience. True American pollster Daniel Yankelovitch – an advisor to the project – endorses this approach but it is designed to compliment the public opinion survey. The generalizations offered below arise from the study permit Yankelovitch to distinguish the mind-set of Canadians and Americans.

Similarities

- A broad embrace of pluralism and multiculturalism (ethnicity, values, lifestyles).
- A deep attachment to an ethic of self-help and individual responsibility.
- A growing emphasis on reciprocity: those who receive are also obliged to give.
- An abiding faith in the kind of education that permits people to take charge of, and accept responsibility for, their own lives.
- A thin crust of skepticism and cynicism about both government and business, overlaying a deep hunger for citizen engagement and positive, constructive action.
- A strong sense of identification and pride in the country and its values.

Differences

- Government and the market. The American government's role is that of the cop and the watchdog – to enforce the law and catch the cheaters. In Canada, government is seen, ideally, as a partner and facilitator as well as guarantor of protections the private sector cannot provide.
- The individual and the community. In the U.S., the dominant form of individualism is an assertive, competitive, my-needs-come-first variety.
- Individualism, American-style, tolerates huge inequalities. Canadian individualism is tempered by a sense of community and a rejection of gross inequalities at the level of basic human needs such as health care and shelter.
- Social morality. American social morality is closely linked both to legalism ("if it's not illegal, it's OK") and to religion. Morally acceptable behaviour is defined in terms of law rather than social norms. The religious underpinnings of morality lead Americans to favour highly punitive responses to those who trespass. In Canada, social morality is less legalistic and is based on a common set of shared norms.
- Attitudes toward other countries. Canadians have a deeper sense of obligation towards other nations and feel more interdependence with them. While Americans prefer to exercise leadership in concert with allies, they feel that their power buys them independence from world opinion.

Conclusion

The risk in these above comparisons which will no doubt appeal to those who think that Canada is a more compassionate and fraternal society than its neighbor is that they undercut important differences in opinion across regions, cultural and social groups in both countries. What purports to be a study of the ethos of citizenship in the two countries may actually be more a wish list for a vision of Canada held by an important segment of the country's intellectual leadership. But these 'visioning exercises' may obscure real differences in attitudes and behaviour amongst the population. Much like the concerns of 'cohesionists' those adopting the above – described approach to citizenship are concerned about gaps, divisions and inequities and believe that we insufficiently discuss the things that we share. In each instance the need for generalization risks obscuring those differences that are fundamental to understanding of the complexities of pluralistic societies.