Intersections of Diversity:

A New Approach to Government Policy Development

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ABSTRACT

Although the federal civil service has vastly improved its apparatus to deal with diversity in the past thirty years, the time has come to adopt an "intersections of diversity" approach to policy-making in Ottawa. Links between disability and aboriginal status for instance, or between gender and religion, or sexual orientation and ethnicity must be made: what have traditionally been perceived as isolated "target groups" are increasingly found to be unified on many social issues. Such an approach, notwithstanding its inherent difficulties, can only contribute to the elaboration of more equitable social policies and programs.

For those of us who have spent our careers in the federal government, it proves a novel challenge when asked to argue for changing an approach to policy development, which for all intents and purposes, seems to serve Canadians well. To advocate such change to a "tried and true" method that we have employed for many years, however, need not serve to denigrate it or deny the great benefits it has rendered not just for targeted audiences but society as a whole. Rather, it is simply to acknowledge that what has worked well in the past may not currently be working as well as it ought to, and cannot be relied upon to achieve the same level of success in the future. I write this preamble because after twenty-five years of working with governments in dealing with issues of diversity, I have come to realize that it is now time to approach diversity from a different perspective. For in fact, Canadian diversity has overtaken our understanding of it.

Since the 1970s, which is when I initially became actively involved with government policy and programming initiatives focusing on issues of diversity, the federal government has made great strides; first in acknowledging diversity, and then in implementing new services or modifying existing ones with a goal of addressing the specific needs of identifiable groups and minorities. The 1970s and 1980s heralded a trend on the part of the federal government to target policy initiatives responding to the needs of specific groups through the establishment of major programs, at times with their own Ministers of State. We saw the emergence of programs such as the Multiculturalism Program, the Native Citizens' Bureau, the Women's Program and the Status of Disabled Persons Secretariat in the old Department of the Secretary of State.

Divisions mandated towards the extension of services to targeted groups sprang up in departments across the spectrum of government. The former Department of Communications, for example, set up a whole directorate in its Broadcasting Policy Branch devoted to developing policy for the delivery of services from the broadcasting industry specific to the needs of various minorities and under-served groups. Departments, moreover, were required to answer to Parliamentary committees such as the Standing Committee on the Status of Disabled Persons or submit annually reports to be included in an omnibus report to be tabled in Parliament on their policies, activities and internal management initiatives related to regional development, multiculturalism, aboriginal involvement and so forth. Over time, departments and agencies not only came to realize the need to broaden their understanding of our increasingly diverse society, they actually found themselves held accountable, at least to a degree, for their successes and failures in dealing with this diversity.

Notable changes began to appear in policy and subsequent programming initiatives. When the Broadcasting Act was being drafted in the late1980s, policy staff whose job it now was to deal with issues of diversity were able to lobby for inclusive clauses such as the one below to be enshrined in law:

> It is hereby declared as the broadcasting policy for Canada that the Canadian broadcasting system should… through its programming and the employment opportunities arising out of its operations, serve the needs and interests and reflect the circumstances and aspirations of Canadian men women and children, including equal rights, the linguistic duality and multicultural and multiracial nature of Canadian society and the special place of aboriginal peoples within that society. Broadcasting Act, Statutes of Canada 1991, 3(1)(d)(iii).

In responding to the spirit of the Act, the Department of Communications marked the passing of the legislation by establishing and providing ongoing program funding for an aboriginal satellite television network, Television Northern Canada, as well as a broadcast reading service for the visually-impaired.

We all recognize that the efforts of government were far from perfect; lip-service to newer policy outlooks as well as many subsequent initiatives did not necessarily always result in changes to the way things were done. I think it is fair to

say, nonetheless, that overall, enormous strides were made. To have used the word "diversity" thirty years ago in the context of government policy on industry, trade, agriculture, justice, universities, culture, prison or transport systems would have drawn blank stares from many civil servants. That is not the case today. The point has been made and at the very least acknowledged by most policy makers: Canadian society is diverse and government policy and services must reflect and respond to this diversity.

Yet as I look back on these early initiatives, I can appreciate that our efforts to date are only a first step in creating a universal understanding among civil servants of the complexity and multiplicity of Canadian diversity. We strove in almost every instance to set up units empowered to deal with only one aspect of diversity. An individual policy analyst or program officer would, for example, confine his or her activities only to issues related to physical disability (visual impairment, hearing loss or physical mobility), another analyst to linguistic minorities, a third to ethnocultural minorities. Even when housed in the same operational unit, these policy analysts would rarely examine the possibility of any intersections among their separate portfolios or consider potential areas of convergence among their client groups. The system neither promoted nor allowed for such inter-sectoral partnering. Target groups themselves, or perhaps more precisely their NGOs and lobby groups, moreover, usually resisted any such convergence, perhaps fearing a loss of program funding.

I write from personal experience. When I headed up a unit responsible for policy issues related to disabled persons, ethnocutural minorities, women, children, aboriginal peoples, and seniors, I was regularly called upon to speak at venues across the country and abroad. At these events, I would dutifully outline Canada's progress or, sometimes more analytically, obstacles to progress for providing services to each of these target audiences. When I re-read these speeches today, I am struck by how much each speech reads like six separate addresses. Yes, these papers were held together by a common theme of government recognizing diversity and trying to reflect this new-found recognition in its policy and programs. But in no way did I endeavour to make the link between the various components. Disability, for example, in no way entered into the equation when I expounded upon the programming needs of ethnocultural minorities.

And so it was for the most part across government. Policy makers in departments and agencies would address the needs of targeted groups one by one when determining how their needs related to mandates. The Canadian Ethnic Studies Program, for example, endowed a number of thematic chairs-of-study at various universities dealing specifically with disciplines such as education, healthcare, and culture, but clearly within the broad context of ethnicity and immigration. What was common to the vast majority of these endeavours was that in preparing the policy frameworks, each target group was scrutinized and analysed separate from the others.

All of this was to the good; we must not lose site of that. What strikes me now, however, is the extent to which we failed to consider the now obvious observation that somehow these target groups may not have existed in isolation to each other. There have, of course, been many notable exceptions to this. Native elders, for example, have participated in programs focusing on aboriginal youth; this is in keeping with the role their seniors have always played in articulating aboriginal needs within the context of a more holistic view of the community. The Multiculturalism Program did in the early nineties support the library of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind to provide books on tape for blind Canadians from various ethnocultural communities. Government programs have targeted visible minority youth in urban areas or official language minority seniors in rural environments. Generally, however, the focus has been upon one identifiable group as if it were somehow monolithic. Diversity was a viable option for Canadians; in dealing with government, Canadians could choose to define themselves as they saw fit as long as they defined themselves with one identifier.

As policy makers, researchers, service providers and academics, the challenge for us today is to break away from this traditional view of social diversity. To do so, perhaps we must first acknowledge that Canadian society is much more diverse than we ever dreamed possible thirty years ago. It is realistic to assume that this diversity will continue to expand in the coming years based upon changing social and demographic factors because Canadians are living longer; most immigrants are now coming from Asia, Africa and South America; increasing numbers of Canadians are from mixed ethnicity and that number can only be expected to increase with future generations; fewer Canadians claim adherence to the traditional "mainline" Christian denominations; improvements in medical science means greater opportunity and demands for accessibility from disabled Canadians; there is a rapidly growing aboriginal youth population; new applications of information and communications technology are providing greater potential for development in rural communities; increased recognition of gays and lesbians is leading to their more open participation in community activity; and there is an increasing awareness of the economic, social and cultural opportunities afforded by traditionally marginalised groups to the collective society.

If, then, the tried and true approach to diversity (that is, looking at a single collective defining feature of a group, i.e. disability, language, etc.) may not serve us as well in the coming years, what method will lead us to draft more effective policy? I think we need, first of all, to step back from the traditional way in which bureaucracies have viewed diversity in order to focus more intensely on the concept of identity. With a fresh view of identity as a cornerstone of our understanding of a new diversity, we can then move forward to integrate this understanding of identity into our research, analysis and policy development.

If asked to define one self, to prepare one's own individual profile, I doubt if anyone would elect to mention only one identifying factor (identity marker). I might define myself as an anglophone, Anglo-Celtic, bilingual (both official languages), Anglican, Upper-Canadian, urban, middle-class, fairly prosperous, middle-aged man. I would undoubtedly consider someone who might identify me only as a man or by my sexual orientation or by the fact that I am an urban dweller to have done me a disservice. Using the identity

markers I have selected for myself by no means makes me unique as a Canadian - there are probably hundreds of thousands of Canadians like me - but it does serve to highlight the fact that to understand me all of these identity markers must be taken into consideration.

In order to grasp the degree of diversity in Canada today, one needs to realize the breadth of identity and the multiplicity of identity markers within every identifiable sector of society. A new view of the concept of Canadian diversity thus becomes a recognition of the vast collective of all of our self-identifying intersecting identity markers.

Across departments, civil servants are slowly becoming aware of the potential of this new approach to policy development. This new approach, which we call "intersections of diversity," affords a more broadly based outlook within government on the concepts of identity and of the actual reality of the collective. In a sense, it is not a formula for standard policy analysis; you will note that I have chosen to use the word approach. What it really boils down to is this: intersections of diversity is a call to civil servants; it is a challenge to be open to viewing diversity in all its permutations and to recognize the need to respond to diversity with all its ramifications.

I write, of course, from the mind-set of a bureaucrat. I am not an academic and it has been thirty-five years since I even opened a social science text book. I have, however, had the opportunity to discuss this concept of intersections of diversity with numerous civil servants and interest groups. Almost a year ago, a cross-section of government policy and program officials came up with a series of identity markers which they determined germane to the preparation of policy and the development of programs. Recognizing that no list could ever be completely inclusive, the following thirteen identity markers were identified: race, ethnicity, heritage language, religion, gender, age, ability, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, immigration, aboriginal peoples, official language, region.

If we accept the fact that diversity involves the intersecting of various identity markers, the challenge comes in ensuring that this broader understanding of diversity is integrated into our policy development exercise and ultimately reflected in our programming initiatives. This may not always be as easy as it sounds. Much as one dislikes quoting the old managers' politically incorrect lament, "if only I could hire a disabled, lesbian, francophone aboriginal, woman," it does serve to illustrate a point. No one single policy perspective will necessarily serve equitably all Canadians just as no one employee could ever serve to increase the diversity of the office or re-balance equity in the work place. The key is to develop policies with the flexibility to be applied to increasingly diverse target populations.

One has to be practical: not all identity markers intersect with each other in every situation. Let's face it, one could, I suppose, make an argument for the inclusion of every identity marker in every policy initiative, but to what degree this would prove a productive exercise is questionable. Sexual orientation or religion, for example, may not be as important in drafting policy in agriculture to the degree they are in drafting legislation on same sex unions. But care should, nonetheless, be taken; only after inclusive initial research has been undertaken, and the full range of possible intersection actually considered, should the more arcane intersections be jettisoned. The challenge really boils down to selecting carefully the identity factors which do relate to the issue, determining how they intersect, and only then proceeding to develop policy and programming initiatives which can address the specific needs created through these intersections.

There are obvious examples of intersections which come to mind. In the field of youth justice for example, aboriginal, region (urban and rural) and socio-economic status are natural converging identities, as are race, region (urban), age (again youth), and heritage language. Within the health field in the context of services for disabled persons, the identity markers of immigration, heritage language and gender may need to be examined together; in another scenario, region (rural), official language and age (seniors) may be pertinent markers for ensuring an acceptable level of service. In developing heritage and cultural policy on, say, new outreach initiatives to support Canadian periodicals and publications, heritage languages, immigration, region and ethnicity may be important intersecting identity markers; and official language policy, region and immigration may intersect to influence linguistic policy.

With intersections of diversity, far-reaching, comprehensive and inclusive research becomes more important than ever. Research simply on age and disability alone may not provide the data necessary for formulating inclusive and effective policy. Adding in specific identity markers when commissioning the research (such as ethnicity, aboriginal and language) might produce results much more suited for defining policy on aging in a rapidly changing society.

One could cite endless hypothetical examples. But the actual determination of relevant intersecting identity markers is best left to experts in the field. The bottom line is that government departments and agencies must learn to step back and view an issue from a more broadly based perspective.

Openness to a new understanding of diversity is, I have come to conclude, an exciting and cutting-edge approach to dealing with Canadian diversity. Intersections of diversity is not an easy concept; there is no ready formula for applying it to policy situations. By its very nature and changing application, it tends to defy a simple theoretical definition since it is, in effect, more a change of mind-set than an application of academic scientific methodology. Yet if applied, it offers the potential for a greater understanding of the diverse nature of Canadian society with all its exciting and ever changing permutations. Its application is an effective approach for comprehensively viewing this country in all its multiformity, for ensuring more inclusive and far-ranging public policy and, ultimately, for addressing the actual needs of Canadians in a more effective and meaningful way.