Interview with

Hélène Chalifour-Scherrer: Minister of Canadian Heritage

1. Canadian Heritage has an interesting mandate that makes it responsible for both several diversity portfolios (official languages, multiculturalism, off-reserve aboriginals) and many of the key programs that contribute to national identity (cultural programs, sports, etc). How has the department sought to blend these two areas to ensure that our diverse stories are part of the national narrative?

You're right to point out that the twin goals of the Department of Canadian Heritage relate to diversity and cultural expression: we seek to ensure that Canadians express and share their diverse cultural experiences, while fostering an inclusive society built on intercultural understanding and participation.

These two goals are mutually reinforcing. A society that fosters creative expression across the diversity of its peoples also permits dialogue, intercultural understanding and ultimately a more inclusive society. Creative expression is an important factor in building a cohesive country. Similarly, a society founded on values of inclusion and openness to diversity is better able to generate new ideas from a broader spectrum of experiences and views. When people come together despite their differences, culture becomes richer in quality and quantity, and reaches new audiences.

Seen this way, I would not say that our diverse stories are just part of the Canadian narrative – the Canadian narrative *is* the coming together of our diverse stories into something grander, a kind of Canadian drama. The French language version of our national anthem calls it an *épopée,* an epic.

This is not to say that there are not challenges for creators among Canada's diverse communities. In fact, our programming focusses on helping diverse and Aboriginal groups overcome barriers. The National Arts Training Contribution Program, for instance, supports organizations which train Canadians for professional artistic careers, including Aboriginal Arts and non-European artistic traditions. This awareness of the challenges faced by diverse creators is integrated across the range of our portfolio, through initiatives, such as Arts Presentation Canada, The Canada Council's Exposed Roots, and the National Film Board's Reel Diversity, and the Spark Initiative.

2. Increasingly, identity as a solid immutable construct is giving way to a more multi-faceted approach. Many academics would argue that separate programs for specific identities fails to grapple with the complexity of the real lives of Canadians. How has Canadian Heritage sought to address this more complex reality?

Canadians have developed a complex and nuanced approach to defining who they are, and I believe that government has to offer support and programs that are flexible to deal with this reality.

As I mentioned before, our goal is to foster an inclusive society where there is a "space" for Canadians to create and communicate with each other, expressing their voices and sharing their own stories. The starting point in achieving this goal is to ask those affected: What do you need? What problems do you experience? What do you want to contribute to your country and community? and what approaches and solutions would work for you?

Flexibility and responsiveness are already a critical part of our programs. But they need to be continually evolving, and we must bring a broader participation to their design, in order to better reflect Canada's growing diversity.

That being said, we have to recognize that certain communities face particular challenges that demand a specific program component or mechanism. For instance, elements of the official languages policy, and the new Aboriginal Languages and Culture Initiative, address specific issues as part of ensuring the foundations of cultural and civic participation, and in the case of Aboriginal peoples, to illustrate and validate their unique place in Canadian society. Our ongoing work to combat racism is also a strong example of how we are taking a broader, holistic view of the challenges that face diverse communities.

3. One of the most unique elements of the Canadian identity is the centrality of multiculturalism. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act commits the Government of Canada to seek the full participation of all Canadians in the social, cultural, economic and political facets of Canadian life. After thirty years of multiculturalism as an official policy, have we made progress in these areas?

Yes, absolutely we have made progress.

Since the adoption of the Multiculturalism Policy in 1971, we have continued to expand and strengthen the Canadian legislative framework to ensure that barriers to full and equitable participation in Canadian society are removed. For instance, legislative changes adopted since 1971 include, but are not limited to, the *Citizenship Act* of 1977, the *Canadian*

Human Rights Act of 1977 (revised 1985), the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* of 1982, the *Employment Equity Act* of 1986, and the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1988.

Progress and commitment across government to creating a more inclusive and cohesive society are also captured annually through the Annual Report on the Operation of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act.* The Report is a testament to the resolve of the Government of Canada to creating a more inclusive and cohesive society.

In order to keep pace with the needs of our evolving and increasingly diverse society, the Multiculturalism Program underwent a renewal in 1996-97 to further our common objective of helping all Canadians to participate fully in the economic, political, social, and cultural life of the country. Along the way, we have also developed important tools to support the implementation of effective policies and programs. Tools such as the Ethnic Diversity Survey, which was released in September 2003, will provide decision makers with key information on the emerging needs and challenges of our diverse society.

I think though, that the most important indicator of the success of *Canada's Multiculturalism Policy* is the way that Canadians have embraced multiculturalism. Recent public opinion research shows that a large majority (83%) of Canadians feel that people from different cultural and racial groups are enriching the cultural life of Canada, and nearly the same proportion (82%) agree that our multicultural society is a source of pride for Canadians (Environics, Focus Canada, 2002). While we have made significant progress, much remains to be done. I am proud of what we have achieved so far and confident that by working with all Canadians, we can continue to make meaningful progress in furthering our collective vision of an inclusive society.

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4. Multiculturalism is now being attacked in many countries (especially in Europe) as being divisive, as reinforcing difference and fracturing societies. How much does Canada need to be concerned about these critiques?

Official multiculturalism has been around for 30 years in Canada, yet controversy over its meaning and significance persists. The concept of multiculturalism recognizes that diversity is now, and will be, a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and of its national character. It confirms that only a positive pluralism will ensure that Canada will gain all possible advantages from this diversity. Above all, it means the full participation in all aspects of Canadian society for all Canadians, regardless of culture, ethnic or national origin, religion, race and colour.

Over the years, several avenues of criticism have been championed in denouncing the value of official multiculturalism. Critics of multiculturalism have argued that it fragments Canadian society and makes it less cohesive by emphasizing differences. They view the multiculturalism "agenda" as leading to a push for enhanced minority rights at the constitutional level.

In fact, if we look at various factors of integration like naturalization rates, political participation, adopting a Canadian identity, participating in broader Canadian institutions, official-language competence, and intermarriage rates, the comparative evidence does show that the critics are wrong. Increasingly, Canada is a world leader on virtually every dimension of integration. The same story would hold true in comparison with other immigrant receiving countries that have rejected multiculturalism in favour of an exclusive emphasis on common identities.

In short, there is no evidence to support the claim that multiculturalism is promoting ethnic exclusiveness or impeding immigrant integration. The implementation of the multiculturalism policy has evolved in the direction of promoting civic participation in the larger society, and to increasing mutual understanding and co-operation between the members of different ethnic groups.

If we can agree that multiculturalism has become a shared value in Canada, then we can agree that it has become part of our shared notion of citizenship. Given the success of official multiculturalism in this regard, there is no compelling need to change the Policy or the Act. Indeed, official multiculturalism is a fundamental policy of modern Canada and a core value of its people.

I strongly applaud the work done and progress achieved by my colleague, Jean Augustine, Minister of State (Multiculturalism and Status of Women) for her leadership in advancing the file, contributing to strengthening our social cohesion.