# Does Canada Have a Multicultural Future?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Canada's diversity model. The authors begin by situating the Canadian approach in a discussion of our demographics, public opinion and discourse related to diversity. Next, they explore some of the challenges to Canada's approach, and conclude by examining whether Canada does, in fact, have a multicultural future.

Countries with diverse populations must develop approaches to tackle the challenges that will undoubtedly arise. The Canadian approach has been honed to its present sharpness on the whetstone of several hundred years of experience. Most notably, Canada has the world's first officially sanctioned multiculturalism policy, as well as a history of accommodating two official language communities, negotiating an appropriate place for the heterogeneous Aboriginal population, and constantly adapting to increased ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious diversity[2]. Our efforts to create an inclusive Canada, while far from complete or perfect, are perhaps best summarized by the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982), the core document establishing how the various diversities of the Canadian population contribute to the whole. There are separate sections that recognize Aboriginal peoples and official language minorities, as well as sections that recognize religious freedom and acknowledge the multicultural heritage of Canadians. The *Charter* is supported by a suite of legislation that recognizes, protects and promotes the rights of diverse groups.

For example, the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1988) commits the Government of Canada to support the full participation of all Canadians regardless of race, national or ethnic origin, colour or religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society in its various social, cultural, political and economic facets. The *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (2002) builds on this model and explicitly details the importance of the "two-way street" approach to integrating immigrants and refugees in Canada. That is, while newcomers are expected to adapt to Canada and Canadian norms, Canadian society and its institutions are expected to adapt to a diversifying population. The responsibilities of both lanes on the street have been explored in recent years in various articulations of what has most recently been called the "Canadian Diversity Model."[3]

Two key considerations should be kept in mind when exploring diversity in the Canadian context. The first is the on-going commitment to engage in free and open discussion on a wide range of issues. The second is ensuring that the full range of voices representing Canadians of diverse origins can participate in these discussions on an equal footing. At first blush this may sound simple, but a glance at Canada's demographics and a scan of its public opinion and discourse suggests this is no simple feat.

## Diversity in Canada: Demographics and Discourse

Canada is home to approximately 30 million people, more than half of whom live in urban areas; this is significant because immigration to the country is today a largely urban phenomenon (a departure from the early 1900s when waves of predominantly European settlers entered the country to populate and develop the rural West). Although present-day Canada is best known as a country of immigrants, immigration levels have risen and fallen, often in response to the country's economic position or to international pressure to accept refugees, such as the so-called Vietnamese boat-people in the 1970s. Nonetheless, immigration levels have been relatively consistent for several years, averaging roughly a quarter million newcomers annually. They have contributed to the highest proportion of foreign-born residents in 70 years; in 2001, 18% of Canadians were born outside of the country.

The trend toward immigration from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa has resulted in an increasingly diverse population. Indeed, more than 200 ethnic origins were reported on the 2001 Census. Canadian, English and French were the most commonly reported, followed by Scottish, Irish, German, Italian, Chinese, Ukrainian and North American Indian. This is a reflection of Canada's history and traditional immigration patterns, but change is expected as a result of immigration of ethnic groups from new source countries and the rapid growth of the Chinese, Indian and Pakistani communities driven by both immigration and a high birth rate.

Canada's growing diversity is seen in other ways, including increased racial, religious and linguistic diversity. When discussing racial diversity in Canada, the term "visible minority" is typically used. This describes, according to the

*Employment Equity Act* (1995), all individuals, apart from Aboriginals, who identify as non-white in colour or non-Caucasian in race. Today visible minorities make up 13% of the Canadian population and, in some cities, visible minorities are actually in the majority. The visible minority population is growing quickly; between 1996 and 2001, the visible minority population grew six times faster than the rest of the Canadian population.

Religious diversity is also increasing. While Canadians have historically identified primarily as Catholic (43% in 2001) and Protestant (29% in 2001), the Protestant population has been decreasing for some time, and the proportion of Canadians who report they are Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist has increased considerably. The largest growth was seen in the Muslim population, which doubled between 1991 and 2001. Religious diversity is expected to increase because these new religious groups[4] are relatively young compared to other religious groups and the general population. The most recent Census shows that while the median age in Canada is 37 years, it is 42 years among Protestants, 28 years among Muslims, 30 years among Sikhs, and 32 years among Hindus.

Finally, we are seeing greater linguistic diversity. Although English and French are Canada's official languages, in the 2001 Census more than 100 languages were reported as a mother tongue, which is the first language learned and still understood. While 90% of Canadians speak English or French most often in the home, the proportion of people for whom English or French is not a mother tongue has increased to 18% (59% of Canadians speak English as a first language; 23% speak French).

In addition to being a demographic reality, diversity is now a part of the Canadian consciousness. We are proud of our reputation as an open and inclusive country and, when compared to other countries, Canadians do express markedly more positive attitudes toward immigration and diversity (Pew Research Center 2002). Indeed, 81% of Canadians agree that multiculturalism has contributed positively to the Canadian identity, and these numbers have been fairly consistent over time (Jedwab 2003).[5] Importantly, Canadians do not just support the ideals of multiculturalism, but also its institutionalization through various policy levers, such as the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (Dasko 2004).

However, when asked about various facets of diversity, Canadians do make distinctions. To borrow from Orwell, some, it appears, are more equal than others. For example, questions on intermarriage (such as those from the Bogardus scale of social distance) reveal some level of discomfort, with religion being one of the most divisive characteristics. One-third of respondents (31%) would be uncomfortable with a close relative marrying a Muslim or an atheist, while 36% would be uncomfortable if a relative married a fundamentalist Christian (Parkin and Mendelsohn, 2003). When asked about close relatives marrying someone who is Jewish, Black, Aboriginal or Asian Canadian, between 11% and 12% said they would be uncomfortable. Moreover, 86% of Canadians would be uncomfortable if a close relative married a white supremacist, although we would suggest that the 14% who admit that they would be comfortable in this situation merits some exploration.

On the bright side, only 10% of Canadians believe that people of different races should not marry (Mendelsohn, 9 June 2003), and young people are more comfortable with diverse marriages than older people (CRIC, 1 July 2004). This is borne out in the last Census, which saw an increase in intermarriage. Unions between visible minorities and non-visible minorities, as well between visible minorities from differing groups, now make up 3% of all unions in Canada. We also saw an increase in the number of Canadians who report multiple ethnic origins; this is partly the result of increased intermarriage (Milan and Hamm 2004).

Canadians not only support diversity and multiculturalism, but also the process – immigration – that typically leads to it. Support for immigration can manifest itself in a number of ways. Two common barometers used in public opinion polling are (1) support for current immigration levels; and (2) perceptions of the contribution that immigration makes to one's community. Support for current immigration levels has been relatively stable over the last five years. One recent poll suggests that 47% of Canadians believe that about the right number are coming to Canada, while 10% believe the number is too few; 37% believe that there are too many immigrants coming to Canada (CIC, September 2004). Tracking also suggests most Canadians view immigration as having a positive effect on their community; 55% agree with that statement, and there is a trend toward more positive assessments (CIC, November 2004).

This is not to say that Canadians have always opened their arms wide to immigrants. Indeed, prior to 1967, Canada's immigration policy was unmistakably race-based,[6] and many people supported it. For example, 46% of Canadians said in 1946 that we should prevent Jews from immigrating to Canada, while in 1961, 40% said that we should prevent non-whites from immigrating (Mendelsohn, 9 June 2003). Even today, while 65% of Canadians say that they would not prevent particular groups from immigrating, 7% would like to keep out Muslims, Arabs, Asians and visible minorities (CRIC, June 2004). In addition, when asked whether Canada should prohibit people from Islamic countries from immigrating to Canada "to reduce the threat of terrorism," 18% agreed (CRIC, June 2004).[7]

Since the replacement of the race-based policy,[8] Canada has become a more diverse society. Subsequently, discussion has focused on constructing a more inclusive national identity.[9] Traditionally, identity was tied to institutions – particularly those developed and maintained by the federal government – such as the national railway and the national broadcaster, which connected Canadians and fostered a sense of national achievement. The adoption of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* was a visible departure because it encouraged Canadians to think about their identity in a new way. No longer were Canadians to perceive their identity as being tied to institutions, but rather as something that is tied to concepts like multiculturalism, bilingualism, equality, human rights and rights and freedoms. By and large, this approach has worked, and Canadians express strong feelings of attachment to their country, feelings that strongly reflect these concepts.

Part of this national identity is the perception that Canada is the most open, inclusive and accepting country in the world. This is an idea exported by countless Canadians. It has also been affirmed by international observers as diverse as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and U2 frontman Bono (who both declared that "the world needs more Canada"), as well as the Aga Khan who recognized Canada as "the most successful pluralist society on the face of the globe." Canada, it is suggested, is a model that other countries could, and should, emulate.[10]

**Challenges**

Despite the apparent success of the Canadian model, there are some worrying signs that it may be threatened. We discuss three such threats here. This first threat is challenges to the two-way street approach. The second is an unwillingness to tackle religion. Finally, we look at the discomfort with complex or intersecting diversities.

**Challenges to the Two-Way Street Approach**

The two-way street approach sets out responsibilities on the part of newcomers as well as on the part of Canadians and Canadian institutions. Challenges to the approach arise on both sides. We look first at newcomers, and then at Canadians and Canadian institutions.

Responsibilities of Newcomers

There is a perception among some that newcomers are not living up to their responsibilities. Much of this is borne out in a discourse of shared values, limits of diversity and an eventual – and unavoidable – "clash of civilizations." Generally, the thinking goes like this:

> *In a country, such as Canada, where there is no single culture, religion, or language, something is needed to hold it all together. In the absence of homogeneity, values are the only thing that we have. We can see, however, that newcomers' values are radically different than our own. We need to set some ground rules because if we don't put some limits on all of this, it's going to go 'too far.' Our values will conflict. There will be, in Huntington's words, a 'clash of civilizations.'*

Forced marriages, female genital mutilation, and even dog-eating are held up as practices supported by minority cultures, but which conflict with Canadian values and our limits (Stoffman 2002). What is often ignored is that a minority of immigrants subscribe to these so-called "cultural practices," and many immigrants come to Canada because they are escaping from or disagree with such practices and beliefs. Nevertheless, there is still a popular perception that we are importing illiberal practices and ideas that threaten Canadian society.

This discourse has been the subject of much criticism. Here, we touch on three objections. First, critics contend that the argument is based on a false premise: that Canada, or any country for that matter, actually has a set of shared values. Many argue that this is simply untrue (Heath, 2003). Indeed, many of Canada's so-called shared values do not differ from those of other countries, such as equality, democracy or mutual respect. Moreover, this fear that immigrants threaten some perceived set of share values is unfounded; research suggests that "within one generation, the children of immigrants and the children of native-born Canadians share the same values and sense of Canadian identity" (Mendelsohn, 2 July 2003). This can be seen by the active involvement of immigrants and minorities in achieving broader social justice goals. Thus, to the extent that some set of shared values does exist, these are shared by immigrants and native-born Canadians alike.

The multiculturalism policy marked a shift from straightforward assimilation to a negotiated integration. The two-way street approach works, for the most part, because of this and because there is some expectation that Canadian society will adapt to this newfound diversity.

Moreover, the values and limits discourse implicitly assumes that there are no limits in society, which is also simply untrue. The Canadian approach already outlines the "rules of the game" and these set the framework by which we live. The *Charter,* for example, notes in its preamble that the rights and freedoms set out in it are subject only to "such reasonable limits as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society." Moreover, the Criminal Code protects against many of the practices that critics fear. Similarly, Canada is a signatory of many international conventions like the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination that further codify the limits. In other words, there are already well-defined limits.

The second criticism is that the values and limits discourse conflicts with the two-way street approach that is the basis of Canada's approach to accommodating diversity. The discourse presumes that there is some existing set of Canadian values and some finite limits to which Canadians – newcomer and native-born alike – adhere. There is no framework for discussion. This flies in the face of the two-way street approach, upon which Canada's approach to diversity is founded. The multiculturalism policy marked a shift from straightforward assimilation to a negotiated integration. The two-way street approach works, for the most part, because of this and because there is some expectation that Canadian society will adapt to this newfound diversity. Moreover, it allows immigrants to integrate by respecting the basic principles that structure society, not necessarily by abandoning their values or coming to share the values of other Canadians (Heath, 2003, p. 22-23). The values and limits discourse views conflict as inherently problematic, rather than as an opportunity for discussion to renegotiate and reconcile our differences. As a result, it undermines the two-way street approach.

The third criticism of the values and limits discourse, and perhaps the most disquieting, is that it tends to single out particular groups of immigrants. It frequently points to immigrants from the Middle East or with Muslim backgrounds as being the source of our problems because their values are perceived to be so much different than our own. This leads neatly into a feared "clash of civilizations," which is the almost predictable outcome of the values and limits discourse.

While the fears expressed by the proponents of the values and limits discourse may be overstated, we can, nonetheless, legitimately expect newcomers to live up to certain responsibilities. These include making a contribution to Canadian society, speaking one of Canada's official languages, having some sense of attachment to the country, participating in politics and Canadian institutions, and learning about our history. These are the responsibilities of immigrants on the two-way street.

### Responsibilities of Canadians and Canadian Institutions

On the other side of the two-way street are the responsibilities of Canadians and Canadian institutions. These responsibilities include facilitating the integration of newcomers, adapting to this new diversity, and welcoming newcomers as full and equal participants in all aspects of Canadian society. Although public opinion data suggest that Canadians view the inclusion of newcomers as important, belief does not necessarily translate into action. We provide two examples of increasing disparities between native-born and majority Canadians and newcomer and minority populations. The first concerns labour market outcomes, while the second concerns educational attainment. These disparities suggest that Canadians and Canadian institutions are not living up to their responsibilities.

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The disparity that has garnered the most media attention of late concerns the increasing incidence of low-income among newcomers to Canada. Although the revised points system in the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (2002) focuses more on human capital (including education, language, experience and adaptability factors), economic outcomes for recent newcomers to Canada are disturbingly low. A recent study by Statistics Canada found that 47% of recent newcomers live below the Canadian poverty line, which Statistics Canada calls the "low-income cut-off" (Picot and Hou 2003). The decline in earnings among immigrants may be the result of several factors including the under-valuing of foreign experience, accreditation issues, demographics (especially language skills) and discrimination (Grant and Sweetman 2004; Biles and Burstein 2003). Moreover, research that looks specifically at the labour market outcomes of visible minorities suggests that race is important. Some studies have found a wage gap between visible minority Canadians (Canadian and foreign-born) and others (Pendakur and Pendakur 1995). Others have looked at unemployment and have found that visible minorities in general, but Black Canadians in particular, experience nearly double the unemployment rate of others (Mensah 2002: 144). Another set of research considers representation of particular groups in positions of power; here researchers found that Black Canadians were 3.5 times less likely to be found in senior management positions in the labour force in 1996 than other Canadians (Mensah 2002: 145). This is cause for concern.

Muslim Canadians are not faring very well in the Canadian labour market either. Indeed, in 2001, less than one half of Muslim women in Canada (49%) participated in the labour market, while the rate for all Canadian women was 61%. The unemployment rate for Muslim women was nearly double the national rate, and Muslim women who are employed full-time earn 10% less than the national average for women with similar employment. Moreover, Muslim women are under-represented in particular fields even when they possess the required education (Hamdani 2004: 16-22). Muslim women who wear the hijab face additional challenges. In a survey of Canadian Muslim women in the manufacturing, sales and service sectors, 41% of those who wore the hijab were told they would need to remove it if they wanted a job (Persad and Lukas 2002).

Although some researchers suggest that the influence of discrimination on labour market outcomes has, in the past, been overstated, results from the Ethnic Diversity Survey suggest that discrimination remains a concern for visible minorities. Twenty percent of visible minorities reported they had experienced discrimination often over the previous five years, while 15% said they had experienced discrimination, but only rarely (Statistics Canada 2003: 21). Incidents of discrimination are higher among some visible minority groups, including Blacks and South Asians. Discrimination is most likely to occur in the workplace with 56% of incidents occurring there.

The educational attainment of Portuguese Canadians is a second example of disparity. The educational attainment of Portuguese Canadians is one of the lowest in the country; only Black Caribbeans and Aboriginals have levels of education that compare to those in the Portuguese community (Nunes 1998). While programs exist to tackle low education rates among Aboriginal peoples, and employment equity initiatives seek to ameliorate similar issues for Black Canadians, no such initiatives exist for Portuguese Canadians. Indeed, Portuguese Canadians are not considered "visible" enough to benefit from employment equity policies.

### Religion: The Ignored Diversity

Challenges to the Canadian model extend beyond each of us living up to our responsibilities. Like just about every other country profiled in this magazine, religion poses a challenge to Canada. This is primarily because of our unwillingness to tackle religion head-on. Religion is nominally addressed under the aegis of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act,* which explicitly mandates the Multiculturalism Program to address religion. However, in reality, little attention has been paid to religion and religious communities in Canada (Bramadat 2004, Biles and Ibrahim 2005).[11]

This is particularly true for Muslim Canadians. While other religious minorities have traditionally been addressed under categories of ethnicity or race, no ethnic, racial, or linguistic category can adequately capture Canada's heterogeneous Muslim population (Ibrahim and Janhevich 2004). The result is an uncomfortable confrontation between the religious identity of Muslim Canadians and the government apparatus established to address minority concerns. This is a fairly surprising oversight given the rapid growth of the Muslim population in Canada. At present, the best example is the desire of some Muslims in the province of Ontario to have a sharia tribunal, based on Muslim Personal Law, established under the *Arbitration Act* (1991). Although Orthodox Jews in the province have a similar system in place (Beit Deen), public response to a sharia tribunal has been far from receptive. The former Attorney General of Ontario was commissioned to explore the ramifications of allowing sharia. When she issued her final report, *Dispute Resolution in Family Law: Protecting Choice, Promoting Inclusion* (2004), she concluded that with the right safeguards in place[12], sharia should be allowed. The opposition of some of the more liberal Muslim women's organization has been picked up by proponents of the limits of diversity discourse as evidence that multiculturalism conflicts with Canadian "values" such as gender equality (Okin 1999).

### Intersections of Diversity: A Post-Modern Challenge

A final challenge is the inability of our existing approach to deal with complex and intersecting identities. This is primarily because the legislation that recognizes and protects diverse groups protects specific groups or identities, making it difficult to address multiple challenges or intersections at once. Although this stove-piped approach evolved as a response to the interests and needs of specific groups of Canadians, it may have less utility in the future than it has had in the past. Increasingly there is a recognition that identities are not clear cut, and the lived reality of Canadians is far more complex. Moreover, the increasing complexity of identities is exacerbated by high levels of intermarriage across ethnic, racial, religious and linguistic lines. Policy needs to address these intersections of diversity, and the Canadian approach needs some mechanism for understanding and including them.[13]

### Conclusion

In light of these challenges, we return to the question posed at the outset: "Does Canada have a multicultural future?" We would argue for several reasons that it does. First, younger Canadians who have grown up with the *Charter,* a multiculturalism policy and increasing diversity express more positive attitudes to multiculturalism than older Canadians. This suggests that we will see more general attitudinal changes over time. Second, given the demographic weight of the newcomer population, there is reason to believe that their concerns will be taken more seriously in the future, especially as they become more active in all aspects of Canadian society. Third, there is a growing recognition of the incongruity of promoting ourselves as a country of tolerance, diversity and acceptance when there is evidence of inequality, discrimination, and differential outcomes. Finally, we have seen, in recent years, much research and policy work on the subject of the Canadian model. This suggests a willingness to examine, refine and ensure our approach continues to be open to diversity – in all its guises – while permitting the renegotiation and reconciliation of difference that is not only the heart of the Canadian model, but of our national identity.

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## Notes

[1] The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Canadian Heritage, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Government of Canada, or the Metropolis Project.

[2] This complex history requires a longer exploration than can be provided in a magazine article. For more, consult Biles and Panousos (1999) or Richard Day (2000). Accordingly, we will set aside the complexities of official language communities and Aboriginal peoples and focus instead on immigration-fueled diversity of more recent origin.

[3] The "Canadian Diversity Model" is an evolving descriptor in government discourse to describe how the Government of Canada tackles a wide range of diversities and the issues that arise from them in the public policy context. Over the last few decades it has variously been described as national identity, national unity, social cohesion, diversity, inclusion or shared citizenship. Despite the evolution in vocabulary, the objective has always remained constant – the quest for forging unity from diversity (Government of Canada 2000; Jensen and Papillon 2001; Lloyd 2001, Tolley 2004).

[4] While Bramadat and Seljak (2005) includes chapters chronicling the long history of these religious traditions in Canada, the majority of their adherents are relatively recent arrivals.

[5] For a discussion of the factors that influence support for multiculturalism, see the article by Will Kymlicka in this volume.

[6] It should be noted that historically in Canada, as well as in most other countries, race was used to distinguish groups not just on the basis of skin colour, but also ethnicity, religion, and language.

[7] This question is problematic, however, because it explicitly links Islam with terrorism. In so doing, not only does it reinforce negative stereotypes, but it does not allow the respondent to distinguish between their attitudes toward immigration from Islamic countries and their attitudes toward immigration by terrorists.

[8] Changes to the immigration regulations in 1967 introduced a universal points system applied to all newcomers regardless of country of origin, race or ethnicity. Points were awarded for education level, market demand for specific occupations and age (Li 2003: 23-4).

[9] For a series of articles on this, consult *Canadian Diversity/Diversité canadienne* Volume 3:2 Spring 2004.

[10] Some suggest that Canada's approach does not differ much from approaches in other countries. Kymlicka argues that Canada owes much of its success not necessarily to its unique model, but to contextual, geographic and political circumstances.

[11] There are hopeful signs that this may begin to change. For example, the University of Victoria's Center for Studies in Religion and Society has embarked on an ambitious three book project exploring religion and diversity in Canada. The first, *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada* (Bramadat and Seljak eds. 2005), has just been published, and the second, *Christianity and Ethnicity,* has just gotten underway. On the policy front, religion became a more significant issue after the terorrist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Biles and Ibrahim 2002). For example, the national security policy announced in April 2004 calls for the creation of a cross-cultural roundtable comprised of ethnocultural and religious communities across Canada.

[12] These safeguards are spelled out in the 46 recommendations of the report and include the importance of ensuring that women genuinely have a choice when this route is taken, and that there are means to appeal decisions through the regular judicial process.

[13] The best catalogue of these intersections has been captured by the "Intersections of Diversity Project" that was supported by a wide cross section of Government of Canada departments, agencies and programs mandated to address the concerns of specific components of the Canadian population. Ten literature reviews and ten policy challenge papers can be found on-line at http://canada.metropolis.net/events/Diversity/diversity_index_e.htm.