Neither Finding nor Losing Our Way:

The Debate over Canadian Multiculturalism

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ABSTRACT

The debate over multicultural policy is typically Canadian. Based on a presentation given at the Multicultural Futures conference in Prato, Italy, this article explores the many complex dimensions of integration, accommodation, interculturalism and multiculturalism. Citing a variety of recent studies, the author presents the attitudes and opinions of Canadians – young and old – on this topic.

Over the last decade opinion surveys on multiculturalism amongst Canadians point to a bright future for diversity. Indeed, as demographic reality, ideology and discourse multiculturalism has rarely enjoyed so much public support. If, however, the term resonates positively with the Canadian population, there remains an important debate about what it entails as public policy – a matter around which there appears to be less unanimity. Debates over multiculturalism have therefore been more pervasive in Canadian policy circles with some arguing that too much emphasis is being put on the things that make us different and not enough on the things that the population shares.

Through the 1990s and into the 21st century, both detractors and supporters of multiculturalism were less outspoken in articulating their respective sentiments and more nuance seemed to characterize the positions taken on either side of the debate with an apparent softening on the part of the more ardent supporters, and conversely some relaxation in the stand taken by many of the policy's detractors. Thus it was not so much multiculturalism per se that bothered its detractors but instead what was viewed as its potentially illiberal manifestations. In effect, concerns about multiculturalism were depicted as a defense of liberalism, a philosophy that its supporters traditionally claimed to be central in their support of the policy. Debate further centered around multiculturalism's soft or extreme expression, its compatibility or incompatibility with the vague concept of social cohesion and its fostering ethnic community bonding or cross-cultural bridging.

The once popular idea that Canadian multiculturalism weakened national identity no longer represents a strong argument in the arsenal of the policy's detractors faced with abundant empirical evidence that did not support such a linkage. As to whether multiculturalism threatened integration, while this remains a sticking point for many, there is a growing emphasis amongst policy-makers on the need for a better definition of what integration involves. Others have countered that what needs better defining is multiculturalism itself. The latter's supporters nonetheless insist that there is no contradiction between discussing the things we share while maintaining our differences and hence bridging and bonding forms of social capital need not be contradictory.

Both critics and supporters of multiculturalism agree upon a need to focus on shared citizenship (something most presumably do by definition) or perhaps more specifically define shared values or common civic norms. However, differences persist over the idea that limits to diversity need to be enumerated and some identification of that which is out of bounds (even some soft supporters of multiculturalism have warmed up to this idea). Others have argued for using the term interculturalism as frequently, if not more often, than multiculturalism or discuss the need to ensure social cohesion in conjunction with discussion of multiculturalism.

Both of these ideas have attracted some of multiculturalism's softer supporters. But its most devoted advocates tend to ignore such suggestions and have benefited from the fact that politically, neither interculturalism nor social cohesion are concepts that are well understood by the population. Indeed such terminology has failed to connect with the broader public, even in Quebec, where there tends to be a somewhat greater number of opponents of multiculturalism. Elected officials are aware that multiculturalism resonates with the Canadian public and by consequence some academics and policy-makers have been frustrated in their efforts to shift policy and public discourse towards interculturalist or cohesionist approaches.

Critics of multiculturalism have more recently directed their concerns at possible infringements of human rights, and notably, where women's rights are concerned – for example when it comes to purportedly obliging women to wear

religious headgear. Paradoxically, such critics tend to target multiculturalism rather than guarantees of religious freedoms as prescribed in the Charter, which clearly carries more weight than its section dealing with multiculturalism.

Integration: Canada's Discursive Consensus

The absence of a shared understanding of what multiculturalism envisions as policy gives rise to divergence in debates around its real and perceived repercussions. In many nations the debates over multiculturalism often pit those advocating integration against those urging assimilation of immigrants. For historic reasons, the idea of assimilation is unpopular in Canada and hence discussion around the ramifications of multiculturalism for new Canadians tends to centre around whether it facilitates integration or creates an obstacle in its path. As such, supporters and detractors of multiculturalism tend not so much to differ over the shared objective of integration but rather over what and how much needs to be given up by those being integrated and those doing the integration. Presumably, ardent supporters of multiculturalism policy opt for a softer form of integration while its detractors want greater adaptation to Canadian norms – however defined. It is here where the 'cracks' in the debate over the Canadian mosaic have become most apparent.

A survey conducted in 2002 by the firm Environics entitled the Social Cohesion Survey reveals that a near equal share of Canadians feel that minority groups should adapt to Canada rather than Canadians adjust to growing diversity. Some 43% felt that it was a higher priority to encourage Canadians as a whole to try to accept minority groups and their customs and languages versus 45% that felt that minority groups should be encouraged to try to change to be more like most Canadians.

Canada's multicultural defenders, including this author, insist that the two objectives are not incompatible. Still, when asked in 2004 about the impact of multicultural policy, more Canadians agreed that it helped rather than hindered integration. In another Environics survey, some 50% said that multicultural policy helps people with various backgrounds and religions to fully integrate into Canadian society whereas 40% that believe that it some groups to never fully integrate into Canadian society. Such ambiguity over the intent of multicultural policy has become a catalyst for various types of criticisms that tax multiculturalism by encouraging behaviour which contradicts human rights.

Multiculturalism's Multiple Meanings

Whatever one's stand on the issue of cultural integration there is a widely held view that multiculturalism is a fundamental element of Canadian identity and something within which the country can take much pride. In fact, many of the same individuals calling for greater degrees of integration may simultaneously support the ideology of multiculturalism. Nonetheless, such support is likely softer amongst those insisting on greater degrees of adaptation. As observed below, 77% of Canadians surveyed in 2002 that support encouraging minority groups to change to become more like most Canadians similarly agree that our multicultural society is a source of pride, and three-quarters believe that schools with multiethnic and multiracial compositions enrich one's educational experience. Finally, two-thirds agree that multiculturalism is a cornerstone of Canadian culture.

But perhaps the more tangible point of departure between those favoring greater integration of minorities relates to concerns over the perceived rate of change to institutions caused by minorities. In the table below these distinctions are somewhat more apparent when cross-referencing responses on the Social Cohesion Survey's adaptation question with those relating to Canadian institutions and values.

When asked in 2002, some 83% of Canadians agreed that 'people from different racial and cultural groups are enriching the cultural life of Canada'. Yet in the same survey some 47% stated that the fact of accepting immigrants from different cultures makes 'our culture' stronger (10% much stronger and 37% stronger), 23% said that it weakened our culture and 28% believed that it neither weakened nor strengthened it. In light of these results it is worth considering the following: If we generally regard the presence of people from various cultures as a source of strength why is it that many simultaneously agree that they

Table 1

Agree (Both Strongly and Moderately combined)	To encourage Canadians as a whole to try to accept minority groups and their customs and languages	To encourage minority groups to try to change to be more like most Canadians
People from different (1) racial and cultural groups are enriching the cultural life of Canada	91	76
Our Multi-Cultural Society is a Source of Pride for Canadians	90	77
Schools With Students From a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds provide a more rich educational experience	87	75
Our Multi-Cultural Society is a Cornerstone of Canadian Culture	81	67

Social Cohesion in Canada survey, Environics, November 28 – December 9, 2001 for the Department of Canadian Heritage
(1) It is worth noting that 51% of those encouraging greater acceptance of difference strongly agreed with this proposition versus 26% of those encouraging greater adaptation

Table 2

Agree (Both Strongly and Moderately combined)	To encourage Canadians as a whole to try to accept minority groups and their customs and languages	To encourage minority groups to try to change to be more like most Canadians
Discrimination Against Non-Whites is a problem in Canada	61	49
Canada is Changing Too Quickly Because of all the minorities we have here now	30	53
In Order to be accepted as members of Canadian Society, People Belonging to Minority groups must give up such parts of their religion and culture that may be in conflict with Canadian norms	28	54
People From Different Ethnicities and Backgrounds are more Difficult to Accommodate in our schools	34	47

Social Cohesion in Canada survey, Environics, November 28 – December 9, 2001 for the Department of Canadian Heritage

must give up their cultures to become more like 'us'? It is worth noting that when Environics asked the same question in 2004 some 55% of Canadians (28% much stronger and 27% somewhat stronger), believed that immigrants from many countries strengthens our culture.

Limiting Diversity or Limiting Rights: Universal and Canadian Multiculturalism

Detractors of multicultural policy have insisted that limits need to be set on certain expressions of diversity. As previously noted, those advocating have been accused of supporting behavior that would contradict human rights. Paradoxically, surveys conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada reveal that advocates of multiculturalism are also the staunchest supporters of fundamental human rights. Moreover a survey conducted in the year 2002 by Environics for the Association for Canadian Studies found a significant convergence between those supporting various rights (i.e. in the case of official language minorities) and the preservation and enhancement of Canada's multicultural heritage as defined in the Canadian Charter of Rights. When asked about the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians (the words used in Section 27 of the Charter) some 82% of respondents agreed that the government should support this objective.

Through much of its existence, one of the principal arguments against Canadian multiculturalism has been that it constitutes a threat to the future of the French language. However a majority of Quebecers (58%) disagree with this view. Does this mean that francophones do not believe that there is an ongoing threat to the French

Table 3 – Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree that the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage or Canadians is an...

Agree	Canada	Quebec	Canada Outside Quebec
Objective that the government should support	82	86	80
Threat to the future of the French language	25	39	22
Promotes the sharing of common values	77	76	77
A threat to social unity and solidarity	32	31	32
Enhances the value of Canadian Citizenship	80	78	81
Ensuring institutions respect cultural and racial diversity	80	78	81
Removes barriers to full and equal participation	71	67	72
Helps solve problems of racism and prejudice	73	74	73

Social Cohesion in Canada survey, Environics, November 28 – December 9, 2001 for the Department of Canadian Heritage

Table 4 – Which of the following two statements do you think best describe the impact of Canada's multiculturalism policy?

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
It helps people with various backgrounds and religions to fully integrate into Canadian society	56	53	48	46
It causes some groups to never fully integrate into Canadian society	36	37	44	41
Both/Depends	3	3	1	4
Other	–	–	1	–
Neither	1	2	2	2
DK/NA	4	5	4	7

Focus Canada survey, Environics, March 29 – April 18, 2004 for the Department of Canadian Heritage

language? When asked whether the future of the French language and culture are secure, a Focus-Environics survey (2000) found that just over 50% of Canada's francophone population did not feel that it was secure. The likely conclusion to be drawn from these findings is that francophones do not attribute the threat to the French language to multiculturalism.

Accommodating Multiculturalism

When inquiring into some of the issues that are often associated with that which defines a multicultural society, interesting paradoxes emerge. One of the most apparent is on the matter of religious accommodation. When asked whether the population supports women wearing the Islamic headscarf in public schools and public service employment, a majority of the population agrees that it should be permitted. Some 57% disagree with the policy adopted recently by the government of France in this regard (38% agree). However, despite the fact that most Quebecers do not believe that multicultural policy blocks integration, some 52% of respondents in that province agree with the approach adopted by France prohibiting the Islamic headscarf in public schools and government bodies. In addition to the regional differences there is also an important generational gap on this question. Some 70% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 29 agree with the wearing of the Islamic headscarf, a sentiment shared by 46% of respondents over the age of 60 with 47% in agreement with the approach adopted by the government of France.

Detractors of multiculturalism have argued that it is the policy that gives rise to individual and community actions that may put the rights of others at risk. Recent controversies over allowing the use of Islamic courts (Sharia) to rule on the situation of couples has resulted in criticism of multiculturalism as providing justification for what might result in the violation of the rights of women. Both such criticism and that which takes aim at the wearing of the Islamic headscarf are misdirected in their attacks on multicultural policy. Indeed, it is paradoxical that such detractors pay scant attention to the much stronger provisions of the Canadian Charter which deal with freedom of religion. Very often attacks on multiculturalism seem to be veiled criticisms at the Charter of Rights and the interpretation that arises from decisions taken on this and other matters associated with what societal norms and legislation may choose to reasonably accommodate.

Multiculturalism and Interculturalism

Multiculturalism incorporates the fundamental element of interculturalism, which is the emphasis on interaction

Table 5 – Overall what do you think should be a higher priority for Canada?

	Total	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
To encourage Canadians as a whole to try to accept minority groups and their customs and language	43	59	45	37	30
To encourage minority groups to try to change to be more like most Canadians	45	34	43	49	54
Neither	7	6	7	8	8
DK/NA	5	1	4	10	8

Focus Canada survey, Environics, March 29 – April 18, 2004 for the Department of Canadian Heritage

Table 6

Agree	Total	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Our Multicultural Society is a Source of Pride for Canadians Strongly	82	88	86	79	78
Our Multicultural Is a Cornerstone of Canadian Culture	74	75	79	75	68
People from Different Racial and Cultural Groups are Enriching the Cultural Life of Canada	83	90	84	84	75
Canada is Changing too Quickly Because of all the minorities we have now	40	36	36	40	48
People From Different Ethnicities and cultures are difficult to accommodate on our schools	40	30	38	42	49
In Order to be accepted as members of Canadian Society, People Belonging to Minority groups must give up such parts of their religion and culture that may be in conflict with Canadian norms	40	31	41	42	46

Refer to Jack Jedwab article in Canadian Issues magazine, February 2002

between cultures or cross-cultural understanding that have been described elsewhere as the distinction between community bridging and bonding. Some advocates of interculturalism tend to reject multiculturalism as a policy that undermines interaction between cultures in favour of support for community insularity that they insist is the result of strong ethnocultural attachments. While neither multicultural advocates nor multiculturalism as policy rejects bridging between cultural groups, the proponents of interculturalism insist otherwise. They do so despite considerable empirical evidence that suggests that multicultural advocates value cultural mixing.

It is paradoxical that it is in Quebec where officials describe policies addressing diversity as intercultural, that the province's ethno-cultural minorities have the highest rates in Canada of rates of retention of identity. For example, the retention of ethnic or non-official languages is highest amongst most Quebec groups (something that is paradoxically boasted about by government representatives responsible for intercultural policies). If interculturalism stresses cultural mixing, then it follows that advocates of multiculturalism who purportedly foster preservation of ethnic cultures will reject too much of such interaction. Yet survey data does not support such causality. Instead, those calling less so for adaptation of minorities tend to be more inclined to agree that schools with students from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds provide a more rich educational experience; they also tend to be more open to marriage across ethnic and racial groups.

Critics of multiculturalism generally contend that members of ethnocultural groups stick together and use the term ghettoization to describe the behaviour of some groups as a factor. Yet residential concentration of ethnic and racial groups is higher in Montreal than it is in other major Canadian cities. While this is more likely attributable to factors other than policies on cultural diversity it nonetheless remains relevant to note the gap between the intercultural reality as articulated by its proponents and the sociocultural conditions of the society. Not surprisingly, a study conducted by McAndrew demonstrates that while there may be theoretical differences between multicultural and intercultural approaches to diversity in policy terms there is much similarity and convergence between federal and Quebec government programming in this area.

Canada's Multicultural Futures Generation

If the future of multiculturalism is to be measured by how the younger generation of Canadians perceive the policy's impact, then its prospects may indeed be bright. Age is perhaps the key variable when exploring differences in

Table 7 – Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree that the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians?

Strongly or Somewhat Agree	18-29	60+
Objective that the government should support	90	73
Threat to the future of the French language	30	26
Promotes the sharing of common values	82	71
A threat to social unity and solidarity	28	36
Enhances the value of Canadian Citizenship	85	74
Ensuring institutions respect cultural and racial diversity	87	72
Removes barriers to full and equal participation	75	62
Helps solve problems of racism and prejudice	77	67

Refer to Jack Jedwab article in Canadian Issues magazine, February 2002

opinion with respect to issues of multicglturalism and diversity. The surveys discussed earlier reveal that the younger members of society are much less concerned about the presumed threat posed by the presence of diverse cultures. As to the impact of multicultural policy as seen below, the 2004 Environics survey suggests a significant divide between baby boomers and those in generation X.

Other surveys confirm a similar generational divide. When broken down on the basis of age cohort, the 2002 Social Cohesion Survey demonstrates that the 18-29 group is less inclined to favor an 'adaptationist' emphasis towards minority groups than are persons above the age of 30 and this view is in even starker contrast to those over 45 who are far more favourably disposed to the 'adaptationist' approach.

As observed in Table 6 several other indicators point to less discomfort with diversity amongst the younger generation of Canadians than for baby boomers and beyond.

And the 2002 ACS-Environics survey on multiculturalism and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms reveals strong support for the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians amongst the 18-29 segment of the country.

A survey conducted in the fall of 2003 on the historic memory of Canadians points further to generational differences in what best describes the story of Canada with the 18-29 group by far citing increasing multiculturalism, while those over 45 regard the establishment of the country's safety net and the challenges of linguistic and cultural duality as equally if not more important.

Multiculturalism and Integration: International Comparisons

It has often been observed that Canada is a society that combines both American and European traditions. When it comes to issues of cultural diversity, clearly the views of Canadians are more similar to those of their American neighbours than they are to most Europeans. Moreover, the demographic patterns and immigration history are more similar in Canada and the United States than they are with European countries, something that is not always easily acknowledged by Canadians. As seen below, the 2002 Global Attitudes Survey conducted by Pew Research illustrates the differences between North America and Europe with regard to the influence of immigrants on the country. Canada tends to describe itself as a nation of minorities or nations of immigrants that lacks an identifiable ethno-national majority (with the possible exception

Table 8 – All in all, which one of the following best describes the story of Canada?

	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Increasing multiculturalism	39	28	25	17
Establishment of a social safety net (welfare, medicare)	14	24	25	25
Coming to terms with two languages and two cultures	15	18	22	27
Increasing political sovereignty or independence	12	13	13	14
Conquest of Aboriginal people	7	5	4	5
Other	–	3	2	1
DK/NA	1	2	3	5

Environics for ACS-AEC, October 2003

of Quebec's French-Canadians). That distinguishes it from most European countries and may in part explain the differences in attitudes displayed in the tables below. In Canada when inquiring into or talking about 'others' becoming more like 'us' increasingly we find that the so-called others are rapidly becoming us – or we them – if they are not already in many parts of the country and notably in its major cities.

The same poll found that North Americans were more likely to reject the view that it is better for a country if almost everyone shares the same customs and values.

Surveys conducted by Eurobarometer (with similar questions asked by Environics for Canada) further illustrate the differences between Canada and many European countries when it comes to how much we think that minorities need to give up to adapt to national norms. In this regard Canadian attitudes more closely resemble those expressed in Ireland, Spain and Italy, though in each of these instances the proportion of immigration within the general population is higher in Canada.

When it comes to valuing the immigrant contribution, Canadians tend to be well ahead of other European countries in agreeing that minority groups enrich cultural life. Only in Sweden and Finland were there relatively comparable rates expressed on this question.

Table 9 – Overall would you say immigrants are having a good or bad influence on the way things are going in your country?

	Canada	United States	United Kingdom	France	Europe
Very Good	18	14	6	3	5
Somewhat Good	55	28	26	36	32
Very Bad	15	31	31	39	37
Somewhat Bad	5	16	29	14	17
Not Sure	7	11	8	8	9

Sources Globus International Affairs Poll, Ipsos-Reid, May 7-11, 2004

Table 10 – It is better for a country if almost everyone shares the same customs and traditions?

	Canada	United States	United Kingdom	France	Europe
Strongly Agree	21	12	24	21	20
Somewhat Agree	19	15	22	31	28
Somewhat Disagree	26	25	22	27	27
Strongly Disagree	33	46	28	19	21
Not sure	1	2	4	2	4

Sources Globus International Affairs Poll, Ipsos-Reid, May 7-11, 2004

Table 11 – People belonging to minority groups must give up parts of their religion and culture which may be in conflict with (COUNTRY)

	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Don't know
Canada (1)	45	55	5
Belgium	73	21	7
Greece	61	30	9
Netherlands	75	18	7
France	69	24	7
Denmark	85	12	3
Portugal	53	28	19
Austria	50	31	19
Germany	61	30	9
United Kingdom	61	22	17
Luxembourg	56	36	8
Sweden	79	17	4
Finland	73	20	7
Spain	33	55	12
Ireland	42	37	22
Italy	34	56	10
EU	56	32	12

Eurobarometer on Racial Discrimination, 2000
(1) Please note that the same questions were asked in Canada in the Social Cohesion survey cited earlier

Table 12 – People from minority groups are enriching the cultural life of (COUNTRY)

	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Don't know
Canada	83	15	2
Belgium	45	44	11
Greece	26	11	63
Netherlands	62	29	9
France	52	38	10
Denmark	54	34	12
Portugal	50	30	20
Austria	43	36	21
Germany	51	33	17
United Kingdom	43	39	19
Luxembourg	56	33	11
Sweden	75	18	8
Finland	70	23	7
Spain	53	30	17
Ireland	32	42	27
Italy	52	33	15
EU	50	35	15

Eurobarometer on Racial Discrimination, 2000