REDEFINING MULTICULTURALISM

ABSTRACT

What has shaped our understanding of multiculturalism in Canada? This poignant historical overview allows us to look back at more than three decades of Canadian multicultural policy and what it means to create a society in which differences are celebrated rather than feared. From the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to the Multiculturalism Act, Karen Mock outlines the various steps taken towards this end. She addresses the challenges of today, concluding that we are presently at a crossroads in the fight against racism – but one which holds considerable promise for the future should we choose to solidify our commitment to human rights, democracy, equality and social justice.

Much has changed in Canada since the Multiculturalism Policy was first articulated. We have come from the euphoria of the commitment to celebrate our differences, to the tensions of a backlash against multiculturalism, with continuous challenges to redefine this unique concept that has attracted world-wide attention and admiration. It is beyond the scope of this article to trace the entire history of multiculturalism in Canada. But a brief glance at some of the research and thinking that shaped and reshaped our understanding of multiculturalism will add insight into where we are now, and hopefully provide a foundation for determining future directions in ensuring that all Canadians benefit fully from our multicultural society.

In the years leading up to the declaration of the Multiculturalism Policy in 1971, the government had become increasingly concerned about the integration of immigrants and the relations between cultural groups. The culmination of the so-called 'Quiet Revolution' and the emerging demands of Quebec for recognition of French language and cultural rights, resulted in the creation of the Bilingual and Bicultural (B & B) Commission to discover the views of all Canadians as we moved towards the recognition of two official languages. But a "third voice" was heard across the country, as group after group spoke to the contributions and aspirations of the so-called "other" cultural communities. The B & B Report came up with an additional volume, recognizing ethnocultural minorities and advocating the protection of their cultural and linguistic rights. Multiculturalism was acknowledged as a reality within the bilingual framework.

In October 1971, Multiculturalism was declared an official policy of this country, and the government began to support heritage languages and activities of ethnocultural communities, as well as continuing its earlier programs designed to enhance long-term integration. The emphasis of the multiculturalism programming was on cultural retention and cultural sharing..."Celebrating Our Differences", with the initiative for the direction of the programs coming from groups themselves. At the same time, removal of some of the systemic barriers in our immigration policy began to allow fairer access to Canada, and the voices of racial minorities began to be heard. There was a greater push nationally and internationally for equality and justice for all minority groups. Along with the multiculturalism policy, there were tremendous related developments in the early '70s. Hate propaganda, the promotion of hatred against identifiable groups, became a criminal offence in Canada in 1970, when the hate laws were adopted as amendments to the Criminal Code (Sections 318-320). That same year, Canada ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The Canadian Human Rights Act of 1977, and various provincial human rights codes, were also enacted to provide greater protection of minority rights.

After several serious racial incidents in Toronto streets and subways, Walter Pitman (1975) alerted us that "Now Is Not Too Late" in his call to action to combat growing racial tension. The Toronto Board of Education (1979) reminded us that "We Are All Immigrants to This Place" with a need to provide better services to the multicultural population of the city. They followed with the "Report on Multiculturalism" and the "Report on Race Relations", and other Boards of Education began to follow suit across the country, to develop policies to promote equality and to implement procedures for handling racial incidents. Usually it was a catalytic event that led to policy

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development. For example, in the city of North York in Ontario, an invitation to the KKK to come into a classroom to present "the other side" made the principal and school board realize they had no policy to prevent people from coming into schools to spout racist ideology. At the same time, having nowhere else to turn, parents launched a class action suit with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission against the local school board to improve education for Black students. Right across the country it was recognized that if people interpreted multiculturalism as cultural retention and cultural sharing, but not as breaking down the barriers to real equality, the policy's promise would never be fulfilled. A stronger, more direct thrust was needed.

In 1982 the Charter of Rights and Freedoms entrenched multiculturalism and equality rights in the constitution, guaranteeing equal protection and benefit of the law, free from discrimination on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, and religion. In the '80s, amendments to various Human Rights Codes provided the Commissions the power to monitor and enforce those rights. In 1984 the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) published "Democracy Betrayed", making public the history of Japanese Canadians, and they launched the campaign for redress for the complete abrogation of human and civil rights of Japanese Canadians. And the "Equality Now!" Task Force (1984) and "Employment Equity" Commission (1984) pointed out systemic racism in education, the media, health services, the criminal justice system and employment across the country. Both reports called for the immediate implementation of measures to combat discrimination and increase equity for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. In 1985, the Urban Alliance on Race Relations and the Social Planning Council asked "Who Gets the Work?" and their research was unequivocal in finding blatant discrimination in hiring practices and in the workplace; and there were ongoing reports of harassment of minorities by the police.

In some circles, the concerns of the '80s were heard loudly and clearly, and it was eventually recognized that equality issues were the results of systemic inequalities and therefore beyond the capability of individuals or communities to resolve. That is, the co-operation and active involvement of government and institutions were required to achieve such goals as employment equity and the acceptance, not tolerance, of all communities as part of the so-called mainstream. These concepts are at the very core of the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act.

It is clearly stated in the Act that it "recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards to race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society". Embedded in the Act is the notion that it is also a policy that is "designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada." As an act of parliament, the Multiculturalism Act is directed to all Canadians, not just to ethnocultural or racial minority communities. The 1988 Act gave government institutions responsibility to implement multicultural organizational change, and the Department of Multiculturalism provided programming not just for community groups, but for so-called "mainstream" institutions - police, healthcare facilities, education, social service, the arts - to develop and implement multiculturalism policies and programs towards equality of access and service delivery. The Act explicitly recognized the special status of Aboriginal Peoples.

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Redefining Multiculturalism: Where Are We Now?

In the early 1990s, if people like me were feeling demoralized, frustrated, fearful, helpless and exhausted, then how much more so the visible minority youth and their parents? For many we also have to add the words angry and betrayed. The only really surprising aspect of the riot and looting in May 1992 in Toronto...or later in Vancouver... or racial gang fights in Halifax schools... is that it came as a surprise to anyone. The Canadian Race Relations Foundation Act was finally proclaimed in 1996 with the mandate to document the history of racism in Canada, expose its current manifestations, and to work for and with all Canadians towards the creation of a society that ensures equality and justice for all, regardless of race, colour, or ethnic origin. However, by the mid '90's there was the perfect combination of factors that escalated racial tension and violence:

First, fiscal restraint was a reason - or should I say excuse - given for not implementing equity initiatives. Many programs continued to be cut back in this area particularly at the provincial level, the jurisdiction responsible for employment legislation. A recession causes people to retrench and compete, and to think of "me", not to be concerned about empathy and altruism and promoting the "other" in the interest of equality. Such a climate leads to attempts to preserve the status quo and systemic barriers to equality, rather that moving towards anti-racist organizational change.

Secondly, though related to the first, is the severe backlash we've experienced towards multiculturalism and all that it stands for - a resistance that is unjustified, and perpetrated by those who want to preserve the status quo. A recessionary climate leads people to blame others for their misfortune, and in particular to scapegoat minorities. Analysis of the data gathered by police hate crimes units over the past decade shows a negative

correlation between interest rates and incidents of racism and hate crime.

Thirdly, international events influence the present climate in Canada. There has been a rise in the right and in xenophobia worldwide. David Duke in the U.S., LaPen in France, the neo-Nazis throughout Eastern Europe, all created a climate in which overt racism began to be commonplace and served as a stimulus for people here to become more bold in their racist behaviour. Also comparisons with Europe and the atrocities of "ethnic cleansing" in some parts of the world lead some Canadians to think we don't have problems here; and so they can blame the victims for complaining, rather than acknowledging the racism that is inherent in our own society. In the post September 11th climate, we saw a backlash against racial minorities, and a real rise in overt racist incidents and hate crimes against Muslim and Arab Canadians, Jews, and immigrants and refugees, as documented in the Canadian Race Relations Foundation's Appeal for Vigilance Against Racial and Religious Intolerance (2001), recent proof yet again that racism is very close to the surface. In the anti-terrorism frenzy and under a heightened security agenda, racial profiling is common, and there have been many reports of human and civil rights violations.

The fourth factor that can escalate racial tension and even violence is the increasing divisiveness among and between equality seeking groups themselves. The essence of our work is to break down the barriers to equality so there can be shared power and equal access for all groups. But because of the politicization of these issues, and also because of the failure of governments to introduce innovative models (e.g. of funding, management, organizational culture), groups are forced to function within existing structures, and end up competing for power, relegating the notions of shared power and the empowerment of others to lip-service. Increasing attempts to grab power for oneself or ones own group also leads people into the dangerous and divisive practice of comparing pain and victimization, and may even result in racism or violations of the human rights of other groups in the promotion of ones own agenda.

The challenge for the future of multiculturalism, indeed of Canadian society as we know it, is to build on a model of shared resources in a climate of declining resources - to develop coalitions and cooperation (not competition) in the interest of social cohesion and integration which are the true goals of multiculturalism. But multiculturalism will *not* be achieved until racism is eliminated.

Taking Action: Where Are We Going?

The time is long overdue for putting all the policies, recommendations and theories into consistent practice - for putting the words into action.

Education and training are essential - multicultural anti-racist training in the police, the media, the education system, and the criminal justice system. Community based organizations and other NGOs can offer assistance in this regard. Anti-racist education workshops to school boards, and guidance on policy development and implementation should be compulsory and system wide; courses and materials for use in policing services and judicial education programs are also available.

Legal/Legislative Initiatives are also applicable in our discussion of where should the government go in resolving the current situation created by the last several years of backsliding. The federal government's creation of employment equity targets as a result of the "Embracing Change" Task Force was a step in the right direction, but we continue to hear of overt and systemic discrimination against racialized minorities, even in the public service. There must be effective policies in place in each of our institutions at every level of government, if we are ever going to change behaviour and achieve true equality and equity.

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We were optimistic when the Multiculturalism Department was created several years ago, with its own Minister and Deputy Minister; and with its increasing emphasis on anti-racism and anti-hate initiatives, it appeared that the will to take the risk was there. But that will eroded. Multiculturalism was one of the departments significantly reduced, when it was folded into the Department of Canadian Heritage and placed again under the auspices of a junior minister as Secretary of State for Multiculturalism. And the Action Plan Against Racism and Hate, promised further to the World Conference Against Racism, has been delayed yet again. Can we withstand the onslaught of right-wing thinking and veiled racist ideology of some of the opposition to multiculturalism, anti-racism and human rights initiatives? Will the federal leadership in human rights and race relations be able to withstand the continued dismantling of many of provincial agencies and programs in these areas? There are hard won rights and freedoms that we cannot allow to be undermined by those who only wish to maintain privilege and power. Neither should we be co-opted nor corrupted by the same quest.

We have come along way, and Now is NOT Too Late. But we were close. Racism has been acknowledged as a reality in Canada; but we will never achieve the vision of our multicultural society until racism is eliminated. The essence of the Canadian Multiculturalism policy is the commitment to removing the many barriers to equality, so that ultimately all groups within Canada have equal access, equal opportunity, and equal rights, thereby becoming fully Canadian. As we look back over more than three decades of Multiculturalism in Canada, it is gratifying to see how far we have come. Because of our laws and our codes, individual rights are protected. Because of our

commitment to a multicultural Canada, communities are working together to fight racism and to achieve group rights. I am still hopeful we will achieve the goals of the Multiculturalism Policy, because of our commitment to human rights, democracy, equality and social justice, principles that will continue to inform our shared vision of what it means to be Canadian.

Notes

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A longer version of this paper was presented at the Centre for Asia-Pacific Studies, and appears in Kess, J.F., Noro, H., Ayukawa, M., and Lansdowne, H (Eds.) Changing Japanese Identities in Multicultural Canada. University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia (2003).

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