Public Attitudes towards

MULTICULTURALISM IN CANADA

ABSTRACT

In this article, Donna Dasko reports on the overall percentage of Canadians who share a particular view based on public opinion surveys concerning multiculturalism in Canada. She also explains how changing social values encouraged the development of public policies which support and celebrate ethnic diversity. Most of the survey data are taken from Environics Focus Canada surveys, which are based on samples of 2,000 Canadians.

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Canada has always been a multicultural and a bilingual society, but we have not always appreciated these facts about our national life. Acceptance and support for multiculturalism, ethnic diversity, and bilingualism have evolved over the last 30 years, as the social values of Canadians changed dramatically. These value changes were spearheaded by the baby-boom generation that was born between 1946 and 1962. This generation had very different social values from the previous one. New values included rejection of authority and lack of deference to authority, while attitudes such as deferred gratification were thrown out the window. Deferred gratification in the 1950s was of primary importance. If you went to church, you'd go to heaven; if you ate your carrots, you could get dessert – that kind of thing.

Deferred gratification, hierarchy and other cherished values of the 1950s were rejected and replaced by values such as pragmatism, empowerment, egalitarianism and hedonism: not putting the fun off to the future, but having fun and enjoying life today. Among the changing social values, there was also a change toward acceptance and support for ethnic diversity. Supporting and celebrating ethnic diversity was related to emerging egalitarian values. It was also related to hedonism in the sense that it is more interesting to live in a society where you can talk to and meet different people from different backgrounds. It is more fun to live in that kind of society than in one that is closed off, which was the kind of society that I recall Canada had in the 1950s.

With these changes, the stated and unstated assumptions of the previous decades – assumptions of the superiority of some groups and the inferiority of other groups – gave way to the claims for recognition and equality being made by all powerless groups. Aboriginal groups, French Canadians, women, racial and ethnic minorities, gays, victims of domestic violence, victims of abuse; these and others rejected the stereotypes of the past and claimed social justice, recognition and inclusion in all of the good things that society had to offer. That was part of the value-change that we experienced as Canada moved through the decades of the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

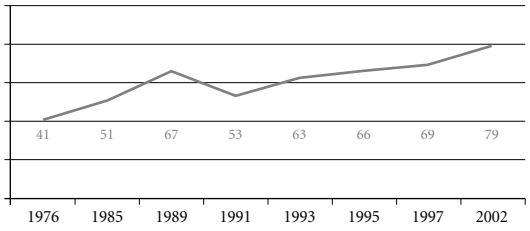
These value changes, moving toward egalitarianism, respect, and inclusion, led to legislation creating the Official Languages policy in 1969 and the policy of Multiculturalism in 1971. I think we are still in the process of accepting and developing these values in our society today. This can be seen in the debate about, and what I think will be the ultimate acceptance of, same-sex marriages. Same-sex marriage is precisely related to the values of inclusion and respect and how they are continuing to evolve.

But as these values continued to develop, there were other forces in the early 1990s that worked against long-term value changes. In particular, the recession of the early 90s was a very difficult time for Canadians. That was a time of great dislocation for many ordinary people. It was a time in which real incomes declined. It was a time of high unemployment. It was a time of eroding public services, as governments tried to respond to the fiscal crisis and pulled back spending from many areas.

We saw in our public opinion research during that period that Canadians became less open and less accepting. They pulled back and they "circled the wagons." They became less generous. People felt less secure, and therefore they were less open and less accepting of others. The acceptance of diversity that had been growing and developing over the previous two decades was challenged and eroded, because average people were feeling threatened and dislocated by the developments of that period.

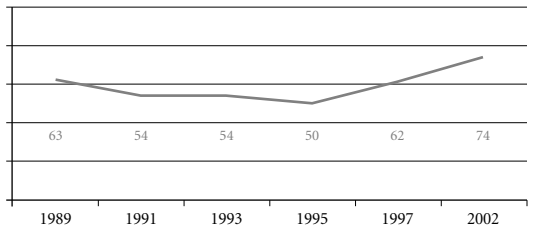
We could see this, for example, in the communities across the country which passed unilingual municipal laws. We saw a rejection of some aspects of bilingualism in the Spicer Commission. We also saw this change in hardening attitudes towards immigration: attitudes toward immigrants became more negative in the early 1990s. Canadians didn't start feeling more secure until relatively recently. Even though the recession itself was confined to the early 1990s, feelings of insecurity lasted until late in the decade. We can see this when we look at some survey data. Environics has been asking Canadians about their awareness of multicultural policy since 1976, in the question "Is there a federal policy of multiculturalism?" (Figure 1) We saw awareness growing until the 1990s, when it fell. It started to pick up at the end of the 90s, and in 2002, we see that the vast majority of Canadians – 79% in this survey – tell us that, in fact, there is a policy of multiculturalism. So we saw an increase in awareness, then a decline during the 90s, followed by an increase in this new decade.

Figure 1 – Multicultural Policy – Awareness (1976-2002)



We asked Canadians if they approve or disapprove of a federal policy of multiculturalism. (Figure 2) It started out at 63% the first time we asked the question in 1989. You can see the trend line going down in the early 1990s and then picking up from the mid 90s until 2002. I note that this is after 9/11 and the tensions about multiculturalism that supposedly resulted; a full 74% of Canadians said they support the policy of multiculturalism in 2002. This is a very significant finding and shows that Canadians maintain a strong allegiance to this policy.

Figure 2 – Multicultural Policy – Approval



We can see a positive trend when we look at the responses over time to a number of questions about the effects of a policy of multiculturalism (Table 1). For virtually every aspect of multiculturalism, Canadians have become more favourable over the 1989–2002 time period.

Beginning at the bottom of Table 1, we asked "Does multicultural policy lead to the erosion of Canadian identity?" We see that 59% disagree with this in 2002. The percentage rejecting this idea has actually increased. This indicates again a greater acceptance and support for the policy of multiculturalism.

A second question we have asked over time is "Does multicultural policy lead to greater conflict between racial and ethnic groups in Canada?" Fifty-nine percent of Canadians now reject this as an outcome of multicultural policy compared to 47% in 1997 and 41% in 1989. Again that figure is higher today than ever. Only one-third of Canadians think that a multicultural policy would lead to more conflict among groups, and this figure has declined.

A third question we have asked over time is "Does multicultural policy lead to some groups getting more than their fair share of government funding?" Just over half of Canadians agree with this, and this percentage has declined only slightly, but nonetheless declined since 1989.

A fourth question we asked is "Does multicultural policy lead to greater national unity?" The percentage who say that unity is promoted has increased from 46% to 65% between 1997 and 2002. This is yet another dimension where we see an improvement, a more positive perception over time.

Table 1 – Effects of Multicultural Policy

	1989		1997		2002	
	Would	Would not	Would	Would not	Would	Would not
Greater understanding between different groups in Canada	67	21	63	24	77	18
Greater equality of opportunity for all groups Canada	62	23	59	28	73	20
Greater national unity	–	–	46	35	65	28
Some groups getting more than their faire share of government funding	53	27	50	31	51	40
Greater conflict between racial and ethnic groups	43	41	36	47	33	59
Erosion of Canadian identity and culture	35	48	36	49	32	59

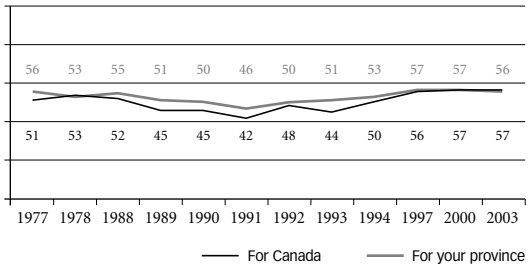
A fifth question asks "Does multicultural policy lead to greater equality of opportunity for all groups in Canada?" Here 73% of Canadians say that equality is enhanced, and that figure has tended to increase.

And finally, "Does multicultural policy lead to a greater understanding between different groups in Canada?" Seventy-seven percent of Canadians say that it does, and this percentage has also increased across our study time frame.

Thus, to reiterate, I think it is fair to conclude that there is considerable acceptance and support for the policy of multiculturalism in this country today. Canadians consider it a positive policy, and they clearly see positive effects of that policy.

When we look at support for bilingualism in one's province, we see a similar pattern, though not quite as pronounced (Figure 3), with support falling slightly in the mid-1990s and then increasing toward the end of the decade.

Figure 3 – Support for Bilingualism (1977-2003)



We have other survey data which show that Canadians think bilingualism and multiculturalism are important for the Canadian identity. In my opinion, this is further evidence that Canadians support these institutions. But we have also seen from our surveys how opinions can change, and how larger events outside of the area of language and ethnic diversity can impact and affect attitudes and public acceptance. When the economy declines, when our larger institutions are being threatened, and when Canadians themselves feel threatened, we see that support for diversity can be challenged. Thus, one of the challenges for our country is to keep the larger institutions strong and stable. Bilingualism and multiculturalism cannot rely on our social values alone, regardless of how supportive these values may be. We also need a strong economy and institutions that support equality of opportunity.

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Multicultural Futures

RELIGION
AND PUBLIC POLICY
LANGUAGE
GENDER ANL
MULTICULTURALISM
NATIONAL IDENTITY
AND DIVERSITY
RELIGION AND
EDUCATION
REPRESENTATIVE
INSTITUTIONS
POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION
RESIDENTIAL CONCENTRATION
FOREIGN POLICY AND
MULTICULTURALISM
YOUTH GANGS AND
DIVERSITY

What role should multiculturalism play in diverse and pluralistic societies?

Religious freedom in liberal pluralistic societies

Gender equality

The impact of multiculturalism on setting and implementing national polices in such fields as immigration, citizenship, foreign policy

The emergence of interculturalism as an alternative approach

Critiques of multiculturalism focused on national identity and the social safety net

The current challenges to multiculturalism policy that different nations now face

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