MULTICULTURALISM @ 50: THE EXPERIENCE OF BLACK CANADIANS

JEAN AUGUSTINE

Jean Augustine made history in 1993 as the first African-Canadian woman to be elected to Canada's House of Commons as the Member of Parliament from the Greater Toronto Area constituency of Etobicoke-Lakeshore. She was reelected in four consecutive elections, serving as Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and Minister of Multiculturalism and the Status of Women, and securing unanimous legislative support to pass a historic motion designating February as Black History Month in Canada. The Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora, aiming to advance access, equity and inclusivity to education through community engagement and collaborative action was launched at York University in Toronto to honour her work and commitment. In 2007, Augustine was called on by the Government of Ontario to lead an initiative commemorating the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the 1807 British Slave Trade Act. Later that year, she was appointed the first-ever Fairness Commissioner for the Province of Ontario. In 2021, Ms. Augustine was Lifetime Achievement recipient for the Maclean's Parliamentarian of the Year Awards.

LOOKING BACK

Fifty years ago, under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, I collaborated in the development and launch of Canada's official multiculturalism policy, Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework. At that time, the main objectives were to encourage inter-ethnic dialogue, promote the retention of cultural groups' identities, overcome barriers to their participation in Canadian society and help immigrants to become proficient in one of the two official languages.

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Reflecting on the past 50 years of Canada's multiculturalism policy, I remain steadfast in the belief that it was the correct choice to officially embrace

a multiculturalism policy. Diversity is our strength and when we embrace inclusion and equity, practice openness, mutual respect and compassion for others in our communities, then we all flourish. As a nation that embraces multiculturalism, Canada recognizes that diverse cultural groups can co-exist alongside one another, with each group's racial, ethnic and cultural identities contributing to a resilient and inclusive society.

As a former Minister of State for Multiculturalism and Status of Women, and as a Black immigrant woman who came to Canada in the 1960s (prior to a multiculturalism policy), I have seen first-hand how accepting and embracing other cultures has allowed Canada to harness the ethnocultural, racial and religious diversity to our advantage. I have seen how a commitment to multiculturalism in the workforce has led to advances in employment equity. Through my work as a Member of Parliament, I introduced a motion to officially recognize February as Black History Month and I have seen how our communities are enriched when we celebrate various cultural groups and learn about their resilience, innovation, and determination to work towards a better Canada.

But I have also witnessed how ignorance, bias and the persistence of racism, in particular anti-Black racism, remains a barrier to full inclusion despite the best efforts of multiculturalism. I can recount occasions on which I was met with microaggressions, as I was viewed as a Black person and immigrant woman who did not belong. As the years have gone by we have come a long way, but there are still Indigenous, Black and other racialized Members of Parliament, doctors, lawyers, teachers, software engineers and even children who sadly experience racism and discrimination in the workplace and at school despite all of their achievements and commitment to seeing Canada's continued success.

I continue to wrestle with this paradox: how does a country that values diversity and is committed to multiculturalism and inclusion with various legal instruments respond to the sad reality that there are many Canadians who continue to face systemic racism and institutional barriers to their full participation in society.

Over its 50 years of existence, multiculturalism has had to evolve in response to changing social dynamics, for instance shifting from a focus on celebrating cultural diversity (e.g., ethnic food, traditional dance or clothing) to fostering civic participation and respect of cultural differences. Now, as we look towards the future, if multiculturalism is to meet and deliver on the challenge of "supporting communities in confronting racism and discrimination, promoting intercultural and interfaith understanding and fostering equitable opportunities to participate fully in Canadian society"[1] then we have to situate our approach to multiculturalism within a space that is anti-racist and anti-oppression. This in turn will allow us to decentre the exclusionary narrative of whiteness that enables white privilege, and remains an impediment to truly reducing barriers to full and equal participation for Black Canadians.

1 Community Support, Multiculturalism, and Anti-Racism Initiatives Program

REFRAMING HOW WE UNDERSTAND MULTICULTURALISM

What would this necessary reframing of multiculturalism, within an anti-racist and anti-oppression space that intentionally seeks to dismantle the systemic harms of white privilege, look like?

White privilege refers to the set of unquestioned and unearned advantages, entitlements, benefits, and choices bestowed on people because they are White.[2] White privilege simultaneously limits the opportunities for Black Canadians to be given a fair opportunity while giving a boost or head start to White Canadians. As a result of white privilege, Black Canadians are constantly having to prove their worth and justify their existence by always being exceptional and having to work twice as hard if not more, just to reach the starting point enjoyed by many White Canadians.

Anti-oppression refers to strategies, theories, and actions that challenge social and historical inequalities/injustices that have become part of our systems and institutions and allow certain groups to dominate over others.[3]

Anti-racism is defined as the "active and consistent process of change to eliminate individual, institutional and systemic racism".[4] Together, anti-racism and anti-oppression involve examining and challenging societal structures and individual biases/beliefs, as well as power imbalances that uphold racism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia and transphobia, and other oppressive systems.

By applying an understanding of white privilege, anti-oppression and anti-racism to multiculturalism it becomes evident that the ability to achieve a real sense of belonging and acceptance as a Canadian, even if you are Canadian born in Toronto to second generation Black Canadian parents, can be significantly shaped by experiences of racism and having to navigate white privilege in systems that exist across all realms of life.

Canada's multiculturalism policy, for all of its intentions, has as Professor George J. Sefa Dei wrote in 2011, "been ineffective in addressing broader questions of structural racism, social oppression, domination, and marginalization of peoples in society… multiculturalism, in tacit ways, comes to appropriate and obscure important discussions about privilege, systemic power, and the way in which particular bodies come to be identified within these moments".[5]

If power imbalances and historical legacies are not questioned, we arrive at a multiculturalism policy that boldly and loudly proclaims that you are welcome to participate and bring your cultural diversity to Canadian society, while in a more subtle

2 System of White Supremacy and White Privilege

3 CRRF Glossary of Terms

4 CRRF Glossary of Terms

5 Canadian Issues, Spring 2011

and hushed tone also says this welcome is conditional. The only parts of your culture welcomed, in this version of multiculturalism, are those that the dominant culture is fond of and those that do not go against the norms and traditions sustaining white privilege. The result of this double-speak is that we achieve tolerance rather than integration. When there are unsuccessful attempts to integrate, it is always the fault of the "other/outside" cultural group and not the dominant cultural group. No examination is made of how the system by design is exclusionary. White privilege contributes to the sustaining of a racial hierarchy that shapes all the social, cultural, political and economic systems that operate in society. White privilege allows one group to dominate, set the norms, make the rules and determine the consequences. Everyone else is required to play by those rules of white privilege and those who lack this privilege are kept at the margins.

At the margins, we get diversity in the workforce but we do not get inclusion nor meaningful representation in positions of power in that workforce. The Black Canadian National Survey research project found that 96% of Black Canadians believe that racism is a serious problem in the workplace. In comparison, 56% of White Canadians surveyed responded that racism in the workplace was a minor issue or not a problem at all.[6] Such a stark contrast in viewpoints is indicative of the very different lived experiences that Black Canadians have in comparison to White Canadians. Even when interacting within the same environments, the experiences are significantly different as one group knows that everything has been designed to benefit them while the other group constantly has to navigate the exclusionary influences of white privilege.

When we fail to question how the rules of the game simultaneously rewards and punishes on the basis of race, we end up with employment equity action plans that were supposed to address discrimination against all women in the workforce but only benefits White women while reinforcing the systemic barriers that negatively affect Black women, Black women with disabilities and Black women who identify as belonging to LGBTQ2+.

Multiculturalism efforts that promote discussions on diversity, racism and religious discrimination or promote these values by encouraging interaction among community groups is only half of the required work. The failure to go deep and to critically ask why there are so many remaining barriers to inclusion and how different groups within various cultural communities experience these barriers remains a blind spot that has affected multiculturalism for the past 50 years.

WHAT ABOUT THE NEXT 50 YEARS?

For the past 50 years, the fabric of Canadian society has been shaped by multiculturalism. During this time, there has been a never-ending series of debates on the merits and shortcomings of multiculturalism to the extent that some have referred to criticism of multiculturalism as a growth industry. Despite these criticisms, I remain steadfast in

6 Black Canadian National Survey, Interim Report, 2021

my commitment to multiculturalism in Canada and believe that just as society adapts to change, so too must the legal frameworks and practices we use to manage our social interactions.

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As we have seen, despite its best efforts to foster an inclusive and respectful society where barriers to participation are addressed, the multiculturalism policy has fallen short in particular for Black Canadians. The latter, despite 50 years of policy, continue to experience high rates of social exclusion, face higher levels of unemployment, and experience discrimination at work, school and elsewhere at higher rates than other Canadians, including other racialized Canadians.

The challenges to inclusion, however, will not be met by having more cultural awareness events or by more studies on the experiences of racism. At this juncture, as we look towards the next 50 years, it is our responsibility to peel back the veneer of a multicultural mosaic utopia and engage in difficult conversations of how dominant/non-dominant cultural dynamics, colonialism and systemic discrimination foster exclusionary systems that deter the full participation of everyone in the society.

I believe that the best is yet to come for Canada's multiculturalism; but the best version, where we can say wholeheartedly all are included with equal access to opportunity will only happen if we have the courage to do the uncomfortable work of questioning the long-held narratives and power dynamics that have become institutionalized. Multiculturalism's path forward for the next 50 years must be paved with the use of anti-racism and anti-oppression approaches shaping our collective understanding of the challenges to social inclusion.