Strengthening Canada's Social Weave:

Diversity, Identity and Belonging

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ABSTRACT

Given Canada's complex diversity along cultural, linguistic, 'racial' and religious lines, how might we best foster a sense of national unity, identity and belonging? Examinations of existing identification overlaps and intersections suggest that a common civic identity is best able to serve as an effective bridging, linking and bonding mechanism among otherwise disparate, unconnected, social groups. This underlying commonality is most effectively articulated in the form of a shared citizenship that is both inclusive and participatory in nature. Common core values, mutual rights and responsibilities, expressed commitment and allegiance to the collectivity, and an enhanced participatory framework, form the essence of a proposed 'trans-diverse' Citizenship Charter that would help transcend multiple dimensions of difference.

PREFACE: Canada is, historically speaking, a settler society forged through the colonization of indigenous peoples and repeated influxes of diverse newcomer populations. Bounded on three sides by oceans and marked by a fairly inhospitable climate throughout much of the year, its territorial integrity vis-à-vis other geo-political entities has been largely ensured by natural geographic barriers. At the same time Canada's economic and political realities have been greatly influenced by its more powerful American neighbour to the south, from which it has traditionally differentiated itself in historical and socio-cultural terms. Though it shares some common history and cultural congruity with the United States, Canada defines itself both as a society and as an emergent nation in part by pointing to important underlying differences between the two countries and their respective inhabitants. Canada is further characterized by a fairly low population density; its enormous territory contains a relatively small, highly urbanized population largely concentrated within a belt that extends along its border with the United States. It has also been favoured with relatively little internal strife: other than initial battles for control between the English and the French, border skirmishes between empire loyalists and break-away revolutionaries, plus a handful of localized armed rebellions, Canada has seen neither civil wars nor armed invasions by occupying forces. In all of these considerations Canada differs from many other countries. All of these factors have had, moreover, clear implications for what has been thought needed, desirable and possible at various points in our country's relatively short history in terms of the construction of a sense of unity and national identity.

Canada's Increasing Complexity

Amost 250,000 new immigrants and refugees arrive each year in Canada. A total of 2.2 million immigrants and refugees were counted between 1991-2000, *the highest immigration flow* for any decade since the beginning of the century and close to double the 1.3 million figure for the 1980s (Statistics Canada, 2003b: 6). 18.4% of the current Canadian population is now *foreign-born,* representing close to 5.4 million people, the highest level in 70 years (Ibid: 5). At the same time Canada has been undergoing a fundamental demographic shift due to *a major change in primary source countries.* European-borns made up 90% of all immigrants coming to Canada prior to 1961 (Badets 1989); this dropped to 25% between 1981-1991. In sharp contrast, 58% of immigrants who arrived during the past decade came from Asia and the Middle East, with only 20% from Europe, 11% from the Caribbean, Central and South America, 8% from Africa and 3% from the United States (Statistics Canada, 2003b: 6). As a result nearly half (46%) of the current first generation of immigrants and refugees – representing some 2.4 million people – reported non-European origins in Canada's recent Ethnic Diversity Survey (Statistics Canada, 2003c: 6)

These immigration trends have resulted in a society that is increasingly diverse along cultural, linguistic, 'racial' and religious lines. Not surprisingly, Canadians reported *249 different ethno-cultural origins* during the 2001 Census. To this should be added the diversity reflected across indigenous aboriginal cultures. Grouped into three distinct populations – North American Indian, Métis, and Inuit – the aboriginal share of Canada's total population reached nearly 1 million people in 2001 and continues to increase (Statistics Canada 2003a). One quarter of Canada's aboriginal peoples are able to speak Inuktitut, Dene, Montagnais-Naskap, Attikarnekw, MicMac, Dakota/Sioux, Oji-Cree, Ojibway, Cree, Blackfoot, South Slave, Dogrib, Chipewyan or any of a number of Salish or Wakashan languages, reflecting fairly strong cultural retention rates in various parts of the country.

Within this *multicultural* framework, Canada is an *officially bilingual* country that uses English and French in public discourse. However, a full 18% of Canadians speak neither official language – English or French – as a first language (2001 Census). In the private realm, moreover, the use of *numerous ethno-cultural languages* is common. 61% of immigrants who came during the 1990s use a non-official language as their primary home language, and the proportion of newcomers who speak a non-official language at home is also increasing (Ibid).

In 2001 almost 4 million individuals (13.4% of the total population) identified themselves as *visible minorities* – defined by the Employment Equity Act as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour" (Statistics Canada, 2003b: 10). This represents more than a *three-fold increase* over the course of only two decades. While 1 out of 3 individuals who self-identify as such are native-born members of ethno-racial groups with long histories in this country such as Blacks and Japanese, changing immigration trends have been the biggest contributor to this significant demographic shift. According to Statistics Canada, 73% of immigrants who arrived between 1991-2001 are members of visible minority groups. Canada's visible minority population is now growing much faster than the total population and will likely account for one fifth of the total population by 2016 *(Ibid)*. The impact is already being felt in Canada's larger urban areas where most newcomers settle: Asians, East Indians, Blacks and Filipinos make up more than a third of the population of Toronto (36.8%) and Vancouver (36.9%) respectively (2001 Census).

Canada's increasing diversity is also manifested in religious terms. 83.8% of the population identify themselves as belonging to one of 33 world religions (2001 Census). This *increasing religious diversity* is most clearly reflected in the rapid growth of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Christian Orthodoxy within a predominantly (77%) Christian population. This correlates directly with the demographic shift in immigrant sending countries: according to the most recent census results, two-thirds to three-quarters of Canada's Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Orthodox Christians are foreign-born.

To complicate matters further, due to *increasing rates of intermarriage* among ethno-cultural groups, 38% of Canada's population reported *multiple ethnic origins* in the 2001 Census (Statistics Canada, 2003b: 12). This reporting pattern is more common among Canadians of European origin whose ancestors settled in Canada several generations ago, as well as newcomers who have immigrated from countries that are themselves multicultural (Ibid: 15). In addition, 3.1% of all marriages and common-law unions in Canada involve a visible minority person with either a non-visible minority person or a person from a different visible minority group, a 30% increase since 1991 (Ibid: 12). These 'racially'-mixed unions are more likely to occur in larger metropolitan areas such as Vancouver and Toronto where they account for 7% and 6% of all couples respectively. Increasingly Canada's combined immigration and demographic trends are also resulting in small but growing number of individuals who consider themselves mixed in cultural, linguistic, racial and/or religious terms.

Transcending Diversity

As a complex pluralistic society characterized by high levels of sustained immigration, Canada faces a number of unique challenges. These include the need to: integrate diverse newcomers into the social, cultural, economic and political spheres of Canadian society; balance the respective rights of various linguistic communities; address historical injustices to aboriginal peoples; recognize the existence of 'nations within nations;' ensure equity within and across visible and non-visible populations; absorb growing diversity along religious lines; and reflect ever-changing face of its citizenry. Canada's current social reality is one of multiple, overlapping and intersecting layers of difference, firmly set within the context of an increasingly globalized world order and the additional, oftentimes competing, transnational allegiances that this can entail. In the face of such diversity, how might a sense of ***national unity*** be fostered and maintained? How might an overarching ***national identity*** be created, and a meaningful ***sense of belonging*** to this unique socio-political entity achieved?

Canada's historical approach to this conundrum has been one of explicit accommodation of cultural and linguistic differences. This has led to the existing hierarchical view of Canadian society as comprised of 'three forces:' its two 'Founding Charter Groups,' the English and the French; other immigrant populations, termed 'ethnics;' and indigenous First Nations peoples. It has also led to the articulation of an official government policy of "bilingualism within a multicultural framework." At issue, however, is whether Canada's existing multicultural policy remains sufficient to meet the evolving needs of an increasingly diverse population.

Canada's Multiculturalism Policy simultaneously supports strong identification of Canadians with their *ancestral ethnic group origins* and encourages identification with *Canadian society.* Both are seen as vital to social cohesion. This apparent contradiction gives rise to a number of important questions. ***First,*** is multi-*culturalism* – understood as sociocultural rather than political pluralism – in fact compatible with *national* unity? If so, via what mechanism is this accomplished? ***Second,*** where and how does national *identity* fit in? Given the policy's sequential emphasis on language, culture, race and religion to current considerations of their respective intersections with other identity markers, how exactly does Canada move from its rather complex accommodation of diversity to the social construction of a shared identity? ***Third,*** can a policy promoting 'cultural diversity within a single political entity' serve as the foundations for a meaningful *sense of belonging* to the social entity that is Canada? ***In brief,*** given the complexities of Canada's multiple diversities, how exactly does one foster a sense of unity, identity and belonging within its population?

Previous attempts to achieve "unity within diversity" have been stymied by a number of erroneous assumptions. The *first* is that uniformity or homogeneity is required to ensure a strong sense of *national unity.* What is often forgotten is that different *types* of identity are operative in any given social context. Some of these serve to differentiate among individuals and groups while others seek to establish sameness and may therefore be used to unite.

What is critical is the *selection* and *salience* of the respective identification criteria used. The task thus becomes the location and subsequent articulation of a common, shared identity.

The *second* erroneous assumption is that primary *cultural* and *national* identities must necessarily intersect if national unity is to be achieved. However, these identifications are based on quite different identity criteria that are, moreover, not mutually exclusive. Cultural identifications signal commonality based on shared history, beliefs, values, and traditions; these lifeways are embedded in language, instilled through socialization processes, and passed down from generation to generation. In contrast, national identifications reflect geographically bound, largely autonomous, self-governing political entities. Cultural and national identities sometimes intersect; however, they need not do so and can also simply overlap. The assumption regarding necessary intersection only holds true if one remains firmly committed to the notion of a nation state predicated on the belief in 'one culture, one autonomous self-governing entity.' It otherwise readily collapses (Rummens 2002).

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Third, when it comes to the fostering of a unique Canadian *national identity per se,* it is often erroneously assumed that an individual can only have one national – or cultural – identity at any given time. In fact, multiple affiliations and allegiances reflecting a wide variety of different types of identifications are increasingly common within today's highly mobile populations. Such an assumption also fails to carefully distinguish between the distinct kinds of organizing principles that underscore various national identities, whether these are shared place of birth, culture, language, religion, territory or social polity. It is also often incorrectly assumed that cultural and national identities necessarily trump other types of identities – including those based on linguistic, 'racial,' religious or gender criteria – in any given historical, situational or interactional context. Instead the real issue is which identities are most central to individuals' sense of self at any given point in time? How are these identifications articulated, by whom, and to what purpose? How do they intersect or overlap with other salient social identifications? And finally, from which kinds of identities do individuals and groups derive their primary, most profound *sense of belonging?*

Locating a Common Identity

Throughout Canada's exercise in social integration, attention has largely focused on the various ways in which Canadians differ from each other in order to better accommodate the most salient distinctions among them, all in the interest of social harmony. What has not yet been figured out is how to make everyone different in the *same* kind of way, or more importantly, the same in a *different* kind of way. The true mediation between unity and diversity is commonality. In the state's management of multiple diversities, it is our commonality that has received short shrift. What we are consequently left grappling with is what defines, supports and guides us as a unique social, political and economic entity *(Ibid).*

In order to be able to transcend our complex diversity, we need ***first*** of all to recognize and embrace – as we have already done – the many lines of difference among Canadians. The ***second*** step is to then locate, articulate and celebrate our "sameness" by recognizing a common identity from among existing possibilities. The ***third*** and final step is to effectively engage and foster this shared identity by making it more central in a truly meaningful way.

The challenge before us is the location and articulation of sameness within multiple dimensions of difference. The goal is to counter-balance various forms of diversity with an underlying commonality that unites. What is therefore needed is a careful examination of the rich, multi-hued tapestry of Canada's 'social fabric' in order to uncover its underlying connecting 'weave.'

How might this be best accomplished?

It is important to begin by recognizing that both personal and social identifications of 'self' and of 'other' involve a wide array of identity criteria, each of which forms the basis both of different types of identity and of the specific identifications themselves (see Rummens 2003b; 2004b; 1993). The salience of each of these unique identity markers is determined by the specific historical, societal, situational and interactional context in which the identification occurs, as well as by the particular identification processes (development/formation, construction, negotiation) involved *(Ibid).* Each identification entails an explicit recognition of either sameness or difference based on one or more of these identity criteria. These cumulative decisions about who is 'same' and who is 'different' form the basis both for individual self-identity and for group formation. The inclusions and exclusions that they reflect form the cornerstone of all social interaction and as such are both culturally and socially informed. The critical point is that there is more that one type of identity, any one of which may or may not be potentially salient in any given context. The key is to consider all, examine how they interact, and select the one most relevant at any specific moment in time.

Not only are there different types of identities and specific expressions thereof, identities also readily *overlap* and *intersect* each other (see Rummens 2003b; 2004a; 2004b). Identities that rest upon each other but have minimal or non-existent interactional effect between or among them may be said to overlap. In sharp contrast, identities that consistently inform or influence each other in important ways they may be seen to intersect. The question is where and how various socially salient identifications overlap or intersect each other, for this can point the way to underlying – and thus unifying – commonalities. In short, careful examination of the different ways in which key social identities overlap or intersect within a given societal context makes possible the detection of *shared* identities that effectively cross-cut various individual ones. Commonalities thereby identified in turn provide the basis of a meaningful sense of

'sameness' capable of providing the mechanism for a new form of social bonding.

Overlaps and intersections among different types of identities are particularly important because they also permit the formation and expression of what Putnam has identified as 'bridging' and 'linking' forms of social capital (2000). Mutually exclusive identities offer maximum ***bonding*** potential among individuals *within* a given social group. They thereby help to unify. Overlapping and intersecting identities, on the other hand, provide effective ***bridging*** and ***linking*** possibilities *across* various population groups or categories. In so doing they strengthen the very weave of our social fabric in an entirely different kind of way. 'Bonding' promotes a sense of unity. 'Bridging' facilitates horizontal integration through connection across various social statuses, while 'linking' permits vertical integration across social hierarchies and thus helps to address equity concerns. A strong, healthy social polity requires effective articulations of all three mechanisms.

Strengthening the underlying weave of Canada's social tapestry therefore requires consideration of all three types of identification patterns (exclusive, overlapping, intersecting) as well as of the three forms of social capital (bonding, bridging, linking). If social unity is to be achieved and harmony maintained, it becomes critically important to examine the state's management of the relationship between diversity and social connection. If unity is the goal, common identification is the process, and increased social capital its most compelling expression.

Building Belonging

The single thread that systematically weaves through Canadians' multiple diversities is our shared *civic* identity. This shared identity reflects common affiliation, identification and/or allegiance to the distinct geographically bound, relatively autonomous, sovereign, self-governing political entity that is Canada. It is in this shared civic identity that we find the strongest articulation of 'commonality amidst difference' and thus our most meaningful sense of interconnectedness.

Shared citizenship (Rummens 2002; 2003a) refers to the explicit recognition of this common civic identity in a way that is fully inclusive of all members of society. Such commitment to inclusion requires that all are equally able to participate in key aspects of social life and that none are excluded from this opportunity. It entails engagement in the communal activities that serve both to connect Canadians with each other and to facilitate various expressions of Canadian identities, and seeks to ensure true participation in collective decision-making. In so doing, our common, shared, inclusive, engaged, participatory citizenship effectively 'bridges,' 'links,' and – through sustained interaction – ultimately 'bonds' previously distinct communities. This helps to build a collective sense of who we are as a people, and in time becomes an integral part of group tradition. Shared citizenship thus forms the basis for an emerging sense of national unity, identity and sense of belonging.

In truth we do not really need to all share a unique and clearly identifiable Canadian culture in order to have a common national identity as Canadians. Civic societies – as opposed to ethno-nationalistic ones – do not need to be bound by an extensive common history as well as a comprehensive set of shared values, beliefs and traditions. What they do need, however, is shared member allegiance and commitment to a common politico-economic entity that is firmly based on common *core* values and principles. This helps in turn to foster a sense of social connection founded upon, and expressed through, a truly inclusive, actively engaged, and fully participatory citizenship. The solution, in other words, is to simply decouple culture and nation, and to subsequently re-define 'nation' in terms of common citizenship. Shared citizenship then becomes the basis for national unity, and ultimately, with time, a unique national identity (Rummens 2002).

In the end the real question is not "what is '*Canadian*'?" but "what does it *mean* to be a Canadian?" The answer may be found in an expressed commitment and allegiance to a sovereign entity called Canada that is firmly rooted in a mutually reinforcing articulation of shared core values, extended rights and responsibilities, and enhanced participation in collective decision-making. What is needed is a ***'trans-diverse' Citizenship Charter*** that both embraces our cultural, linguistic, 'racial,' and religious differences and transcends our multiple diversities. Such a Charter would seek to articulate our society's overarching core values and locate the very responsibilities of our shared citizenship in our active commitment to them.

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