INTERVIEW WITH YASMEEN ABU-LABAN

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What should be done to enhance implementation of the Multiculturalism Act at the institutional and community levels?

As we are nearing the twentieth anniversary of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, it is an appropriate moment to consider what the Act has (and has not) accomplished and ways and means by which its implementation could be enhanced.

Although Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau proclaimed the policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework in 1971, the 1988 *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* legalized multiculturalism. In other words, the Act, along with the constitutional entrenchment of multiculturalism in Section 27 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, served to make multiculturalism a firm part of Canadian law. This helps protect multiculturalism from the shifting views of any incoming government, since mere policy is much easier to undo.

The Act also reflects the way multiculturalism evolved from the 1970s, in response to the concerns articulated by increasing numbers of racialized immigrant groups. So while Prime Minister Trudeau's multiculturalism policy focused primarily on culture, the Act itself also gives explicit recognition to the problem of racial discrimination. Additionally, the Act makes specific mention of the rights of Aboriginal peoples, enhancing non-official languages, contains requirements that compel all federal departments and agencies to take measures to implement multiculturalism, and it requires that there be an annual report to parliament on the Act's operation.

If we examine the actual operation of the Act over nearly two decades, some fault lines become readily apparent. It lacks mandated goals and there are no penalties imposed on federal departments not complying with multiculturalism. When the Act was first proposed, many groups supportive of multiculturalism faulted the relatively weak language of the Act (there are, for example, many instances where the word "may" rather than "shall" appears in the text). While the "spirit" of the law might have prevailed under certain circumstances, this was not the case for much of the past two decades. In the 1990s, multiculturalism itself came under increasing attack, and successive governments became party to what many political scientists refer to as the neoliberal turn, whereby social funding in a variety of policy areas (including multiculturalism) was subject to cutbacks, and any spending had to be justified in new terms. Under these new terms, it has been impossible to get funding for certain kinds of activities for multiculturalism (e.g., support for teaching non-official languages, or for the meetings or communications of community groups with their own members or with members of the larger Canadian society). Moreover, it has been cumbersome for community groups, many relying on underpaid workers or overworked volunteers, to apply for money. If the letter of the law is not changed, at least the spirit of the *Multiculturalism Act* might be better enhanced through greater attention to enforcing provisions, greater funding, and a re-consideration (and simplification) of the terms of funding for community groups. Not least, the spirit of the Act also requires that the outstanding land and self-government claims of Aboriginal peoples be justly handled.

Since 2005, there has been an injection of some new money to support the redress claims of certain groups who historically experienced discrimination at the hands of the Canadian state (Ukrainian-Canadians, Italian-Canadians and Chinese-Canadians). This welcome addition suggests that the government of the day in fact has a great deal of latitude in how multiculturalism is supported and implemented.

Who are the vulnerable groups, individuals and victims of racism and racial discrimination in services, employment and civic participation (e.g. political empowerment?)

Canada's 1986 *Employment Equity Act* usefully draws attention to four groups that have historically experienced disadvantage in the Canadian labour market: women; Aboriginal peoples; people with disabilities; and visible minorities. Studies by sociologists have shown how these same groups can be disadvantaged in accessing services (Carniol, 2005). Studies by political scientists also show that these same groups are under-represented in relation to elected office at the municipal, provincial and national levels (e.g., Abu-Laban, 2002; Hunter, 2003; Bonnett, 2003; D'Aubin and Stienstra, 2004). This then forms an important starting point for understanding discrimination in Canada.

To identify particularly vulnerable groups, we need to go further. For example, those that are poor and lack what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1973) calls cultural capital (i.e. the specific language and cultural skills needed to succeed in a society) face compounded disadvantage. In other words, someone who is a visible minority, has limited knowledge of an official language, and is poor is likely more vulnerable than someone who is a visible minority, speaks English and French, and owns a business. Official language knowledge itself needs nuanced understanding: incoming immigrants who know only French have not necessarily fared well in many parts of Canada outside Québec in terms of accessing services and employment (Razafindrazaka, 2002). The experience of racism and racial discrimination can touch many, irrespective of class and cultural capital.

Racism and racial discrimination specifically manifest themselves in complex and historically specific ways. The defeat of Nazism and the advent of such international instruments as the 1948 United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the 1969 *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (to which Canada is a party) served to widely discredit unfounded pseudoscientific views that there were genetically based differences between different "races." However, expressions of racism today (such as those seen in far right movements and parties) often do not stress biologically based differences; rather, the stress is placed on purported cultural or value differences. We clearly see this today with respect to Muslim immigrants and minorities, and this has given rise to the problem of Islamophobia across Western countries, including Canada.

To more fully combat discrimination, whether in employment or in other vital spheres of life, it is important to be aware of the complex situations in which we live today and of the layered nuances which may advantage some at the expense of others.

What strategies can help build capacity including social capital for new and/or vulnerable ethno-cultural and ethno-racial communities? (What are the best types of institutional supports that can strengthen the newer community's capacity to adapt and overcome barriers to economic, social and political participation?

As a package, the research that has emerged through Canada's contribution to the international Metropolis Project has highlighted important policy avenues in which the capacity of immigrants and minorities might be better enhanced across social, economic and political spheres. To name a few, these include developing institutional mechanisms to better recognize the credentials of incoming immigrants to enable them to gain employment in areas reflecting their training; enhancing official language training as well as job training; and developing more mechanisms to ensure that the delivery of social and health services meets the needs of immigrants and minorities.

Education, as an institution, is also important. Education is firmly linked to one's life chances, and the diversity of Canada's population needs better representation in terms of who is teaching, what is taught and how it is taught from kindergarten through university. Put differently, much of what passes today as "multicultural education" is strikingly superficial, and not really geared at empowering those that are disadvantaged to get respect, let alone a fair slice of the pie.

At the level of political participation, I note as a political scientist that in successive elections across all three levels of government, those running for political office (and frequently those speaking about politics in the media) do not reasonably reflect the full range of diversity of Canada's population. This then suggests that institutions like the media and political parties have scope to change to become more inclusive of Canada's diversity. In this context, it is noteworthy that immigrant and minority community groups and associations, unions and the women's movement have played an important role historically in fighting for fairness, not only for their own members (who are increasingly diverse) but for all Canadians. The presence of such groups in Canadian politics and in the media is critically important.

What factors contribute to the exclusion of second generation ethno-cultural and ethno-racial youth in Canada?

The economic, social and political exclusion of immigrant and minority parents can result in the exclusion of their offspring, so it would be a mistake to not acknowledge this fact either in analysis or in policy development.

Education provides an important avenue for individual betterment. However, Canada lacks a universal program for early childhood education, and this is unfortunate because Quebec's experience (as well as that of other countries) shows that such a program can be highly beneficial to both children and parents. All too often, secondary schools are inadequately supported to meet the needs of a culturally and racially diverse student body, and we have yet to put in place mechanisms to support life-long education and training in ways that empower minority youth.

Forms of systemic discrimination (in the justice system, the education system, and the labour market), the experience of discrimination from individuals while shopping or renting a house, and forms of stereotyping in the media and popular culture can also work to disadvantage some members of the second generation, and their children.

A particularly negative trend emerging in the context of the war on terrorism in the past few years is that fear and concern directed at immigrants who are perceived to be Arab and/or Muslim is now directed at "the second generation" of these immigrant groups. In Canada, the arrest of 17 suspects in June of 2006 on terror charges still has to wind its way through the courts. Irrespective of the guilt or innocence of these individuals, it is important to note that the discourse of "home grown terrorist" is one that can contribute to new stereotypes and forms of exclusion.

Not least, at the level of everyday exchanges, it is important to consider how, despite three decades of official multiculturalism (and nearly two decades of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*), the question "where are you from?" is still asked of so many members of racialized minorities who were born and raised in Canada, and some whose parents and grandparents were born in Canada as well.

This would suggest that there is still much work to be done in the name of multiculturalism.

The good news is that recent opinion polls suggest that across generations, younger Canadians tend to be more supportive of multiculturalism, compared to their elders (Jebwab, 2006). This bodes well for Canada's future.

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