RACISM, RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND MULTICULTURALISM:

What is the Connection?

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ABSTRACT

Understanding racism requires awareness and knowledge of the historical context in which it takes place; the recognition that racism and other forms of related intolerance are experienced differently by different groups; and the importance of meaningful interactions leading to empathy within and between racialized communities. Essential also is the understanding of the systemic nature and impact of racism and racial discrimination. Building on the historical and inter-community approaches, Karen Mock highlights current challenges and practical strategies to combat new forms of racism and hate. She cautions that rather than post-multiculturalism, it is important to redefine and clarify the current policies and concepts, along with effective measures for implementation, including the demand for accountability. The connection between multiculturalism and anti-racism lies in the fact that the goals and objectives of a multicultural Canada will never be achieved until racism and all forms of racial discrimination are eliminated.

In the more than thirty five years since the declaration of the *Multiculturalism Policy* (1971), and almost twenty years since it was enshrined in law in the *Multiculturalism Act* (1988), we have come from the euphoria of the commitment to celebrate our differences, through the challenges of effective integration, anti-racism and equity initiatives, to the tension of a backlash against multiculturalism – continually challenging the government and the Canadian population to refine and clarify this unique concept that has attracted world-wide attention and admiration.

The best approaches to improve understanding of the phenomenon of racism in Canada

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" – George Santayana

To understand the phenomenon of racism in Canada, it is essential to recognize that racism occurs in a historical context. A necessary first step towards understanding racism is to become aware of the nature and extent of the history of racism in this country. It has been well documented that racism and hate propaganda have long been part of the Canadian experience,[1] but it is of serious concern how few Canadians are aware of the history of racism in Canada. Early European settlers promoted ideas that Aboriginal peoples were less human than the colonizers, thereby excusing the abuses they perpetrated on the First Nations, some of which continue to this day. Racism, racial discrimination and anti-Semitism were rife throughout the shameful period of the '30s and the '40s, and continued with racist immigration policies post-war.

However, in what may be called the 'pre-multiculturalism' years[2] leading up to the declaration of the policy in 1971, the government became increasingly concerned about the integration of immigrants and the relations between cultural groups. In the '60's, the Citizenship Branch of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, that had been organized during the war, was moved to the Department of the Secretary of State, paving the way for the '70's emphasis on cultural retention and cultural sharing. At the same time, removal of some of the systemic barriers in our immigration policies began to allow fairer access to Canada, along with a greater push nationally and internationally for equality and justice for all minority groups. Along with the multiculturalism policy, there were significant strides made in the '70's.[3] Hate propaganda, the promotion of hatred against identifiable groups, became a criminal offence in Canada, when the hate laws were adopted as amendments to the *Criminal Code*. Canada had ratified the *International Convention on the*

Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Canadian government began to give more attention to equality issues. The *Canadian Human Rights Act* of 1977, and various provincial human rights codes, were also enacted to provide greater protection of minority rights. That is, the so-called 'high multiculturalism' period saw increased government initiatives to achieve equality, respect and tolerance, through public policies, and 'mainstreaming' of the concept, along with funding of various cultural organizations.[4]

But several serious racial incidents and a growing backlash in the late '70s and early 80's called for action to combat growing racial tension as a result of changing demographics and the necessity to provide better services to the multicultural population of major urban areas across Canada. Public and private sector agencies developed policies to promote equality in their systems and to implement procedures for handling racial incidents when they occurred. Usually it was a catalytic event that led to policy development. For example, an invitation to the KKK to come into a classroom to present "the other side" made a principal and school board in Ontario realize they had no policy to prevent hate mongers from coming into the school to spout racist ideology. Around the same time, having nowhere else to turn, parents in Nova Scotia launched a class action suit with the provincial 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.

Still not able to use the "r-word" and get funded, multicultural councils and educational associations were created to build coalitions and develop curricula, resource materials and programs that were inclusive and designed to put the multiculturalism policy into practice. These programs highlighted another essential element in understanding racism – the importance of intercultural/interracial cooperation and dialogue – that is, getting to know "the other" and the experiences first hand of racialized communities. Aboriginal groups became more vocal at this time, with the concern that multiculturalism, as it was being interpreted, did not include them. With increasing pressure, multiculturalism programming began both more overtly to include race relations and anti-racism initiatives, and to include and enhance Aboriginal participation.

Even with the *Charter* entrenching multiculturalism and equality rights in the constitution in 1982, and with Human Rights Commissions given the power to monitor and enforce those rights, the overall goal of racial equality remained elusive. In 1984, Japanese Canadians' campaign for redress, the "*Equality Now*!" Task Force and "*Employment Equity*" Commission highlighted systemic racism both historically and currently in education, the media, health services, the criminal justice system and employment across the country. Ongoing research by the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, the Social Planning Council and several other NGO's was unequivocal in documenting blatant discrimination in the workplace.[5] Study after study revealed that differential treatment of racialized minorities appeared to be the norm, resulting in lack of equal access to services, and the frustration, alienation, and continued feelings of marginalization and helplessness. Understanding the dynamics of racism, and the role of power and privilege in maintaining it, is also essential for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon.

Equality issues are the result 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 are 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 *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1988) that is directed to *all* Canadians, not just to ethnocultural or racialized communities. But failure to engage in effective social marketing of the Act, combined with escalating racism, as well as increasing *anti*-multiculturalism rhetoric concomitant with the rise in right-wing thinking worldwide, has led to ongoing politicization of the concept and increased frustration among equality seeking groups. Twenty years after the proclamation of the Act, many of us continue to ask: how long does it take to turn words into action and policy into practice?

New forms of racism and racial discrimination and what can be done to combat them

By the mid '90's there was the perfect combination of factors that escalated racial tensions and violence. The proliferation of hate group and extremist activity across the country during this 'anti-multiculturalism' period was testimony to the results of these exacerbating factors leading to new forms of racism and racial discrimination – or rather, old forms of discrimination in new guises. Four factors have contributed to the current forms of racism in Canada:

1) Fiscal restraint is often the reason (or excuse) given for currently not implementing anti-racism and equity initiatives, and many programs continue to be cut back in this area. Declining resources cause 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 organizational and institutional change.

2) We are experiencing a severe backlash towards multiculturalism and all that it stands for – a resistance that is unjustified, 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. During such times, all identifiable minorities are at risk. Analysis of the data gathered by hate crimes units over the past decade shows a negative correlation between interest rates and incidents of racism and hate crime.

3) International events influence incidence of racism and discrimination in Canada. There has been a rise in right wing extremism and xenophobia worldwide – right wing parties in the U.S., France, Britain, Germany, and the neo-Nazis throughout Eastern Europe, all create a climate in which overt racism begins to be commonplace and serves as a stimulus for people here to become bolder in their racist behaviour. 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 aftermath of September 11, 2001, we witnessed a backlash against racialized minorities, and a dramatic increase in overt racist incidents and hate crimes against Muslim and Arab Canadians, Jews, immigrants and refugees, as documented by police data and in the Canadian Race Relations Foundation's Appeal for Vigilance Against Racial and Religious Intolerance.[6] This is recent proof yet again that racism is very close to the surface. Ongoing tensions in the Middle East have resulted in an unprecedented rise in anti-Semitic incidents in Canada in recent years. And in the anti-terrorism frenzy and under a heightened security agenda, racial profiling is not uncommon, with continued reports of the violation and abrogation of human and civil rights, almost reminiscent of the 1940's – strengthening the resolve of human rights organizations and equality seeking groups to advocate for the crucial balance between rights, freedoms and responsibilities – *not* the perpetration of racism and racial (and religious) discrimination under the guise of security.

4) Increasing divisiveness among and between minority communities and equity seeking groups adds to new forms of racial discrimination. Declining resources, combined with increasing frustration and marginalization, leads people into the dangerous and divisive practice of comparing pain and victimization, and may even result in racism or other violations of human rights in the promotion of ones own agenda.

It is ludicrous for people to claim that they are working to eliminate racism and discrimination, and then continue to stereotype minority groups other than their own. We have witnessed an increase in anti-Semitism even among some who profess anti-oppression principles. And we must stop racism among those who fight anti-Semitism, and homophobia and sexism among many groups fighting for equality and human rights. While we must acknowledge that racial discrimination is experienced differently by different groups, failure to understand intersectionality among and similarities between various forms of oppression makes single issued and self-centred struggles blatantly transparent. Self examination is essential in our work, lest the victim becomes the victimizer, and the quest for shared power becomes nothing more than a grab for power.[7]

Indicators and cost of racism and racial discrimination in the community and the workplace

Along with new and continuing forms of racial discrimination is the gap that continues to exist between theory and practice in the community and in the workplace. For example, every teacher who understands child development and learning theory will emphasize the importance of individual self esteem, the connection between self worth and learning, and of every child's having role models so that he or she can reach full potential. But many of those same teachers will argue against employment equity in a school board where a person of colour is more likely to be the caretaker than a teacher or principal. Or that teacher will advocate continuing to call the winter festive celebration the "Christmas" Concert, while children of minority religious groups continue to feel like second-class citizens. In a study I conducted not long ago on the nature and extent of hate activity in Toronto, one young Black student poignantly told me that he went to a school where there was a greater punishment for smoking than for racism.[8] The emotional and social costs of racism remain great.

Evaluation of the implementation of earlier Multiculturalism and Race Relations policies in school boards and public agencies was disappointing indeed. Any attempt at real organizational change was met with resistance, and resulted in further marginalization of the staff who was trying to combat racism and effect change. Many research studies in education, media, policing and health revealed very little movement in this area. It was also clear that effective race relations training in each of these sectors was sorely lacking. Parents and community groups were becoming more vocal in their demands for equitable treatment in schools. Backlogs were becoming more jammed in the Human Rights Commissions. And all the while alleged police harassment, and even shootings of minorities, in particular Black youth, increased. Clearly celebrating our differences was not enough. And the *real* costs of failure to be accountable for effective implementation of anti-racist change have been great indeed.

Having the courage to name the problem and to use the appropriate language was essential. The Multiculturalism Policy and its programs had enabled us to do the research, gather the data, and have the conferences… but then what? Many of the task forces, commissions and research studies of the '80's and '90's, with all their recommendations, represent the collective voices of many marginalized and victimized Canadians… voices summarized and then silenced in expensive reports on shelves.

'Post-multiculturalism' discourse points to the current indicators of racism as the failure of integration in workplaces and communities – highlighting residential segregation, effectively separate schools, different places of worship, disparate and non-communicative community associations, and discrete social networks and places of leisure – claiming that it was multiculturalism that

accentuated and preserved differences and separateness, resulting in breakdown and conflict (the very antithesis of the rationale for the policy in the first place). Post-multiculturalism discourse calls for a sense of common citizenship, shared values and civic identity,[9] much of what the early discussion of multiculturalism was designed to achieve.

Have we made progress as a society in fighting racism in Canada?

There has been a lot of talk, and many recommendations over the years, with not insignificant costs attached. And we have indeed made progress by enacting significant legislation. The UN Special Rapporteur on Racism, M. Doudou Diene, acknowledged in 2003 that Canada has the most advanced legislative framework in the world in terms of diversity, anti-racism and human rights. But he pointed out that implementation is inconsistent, leaving significant gaps. So much so that there is a feeling of betrayal, frustration, helplessness, and even hopelessness among racialized groups, at the same time as there is a retrenchment and backlash by the so-called dominant groups, who are having an increasing influence on government policies and programs. Politicians have seized on this discontent in their own grab for power, and many of the strides we made in the development and implementation of the multiculturalism policy, as we moved from cultural retention to anti-racism in the quest for equity, have been eroded. As an optimist I say that we would not be experiencing a backlash if we weren't making progress. Let us ensure that evidence of that progress is translated into concrete action that affects those who do not see any change or hope of change for their own lives.

The time is long overdue for putting the policies and the recommendations and the theories into practice, for putting the words into action. It is not the multiculturalism policy that is at fault; it is the lack of implementation of that policy in its fullest form. People feel they have not been listened to and regretfully have been shown that only when their frustration leads to violence and lawlessness will their needs be taken seriously. The situation also makes the disenfranchised very vulnerable to being drawn in by propaganda perpetrated by leaders who, in their quest for power, scapegoat others, build on anger out of proportion to their lived experience, and ultimately turn to violence to enhance their power and control. We don't need new task forces – we need to implement the old ones and build on them, acknowledging progress made and giving credit where credit is due. Such was the finding of the Hate Crimes Community Working Group – building on solid work done over the years and recommending an action plan with eight thematic areas: Definitions (the importance of standardizing terminology and naming the various forms of racism and racial discrimination); Aboriginal Peoples (their unique position); Communities (empowerment, partnerships, networks and coalition building, and meaningful involvement in decision making); Education and Training (the inclusive curriculum and mandatory anti-discrimination training for all professionals); Victim Services (enhancing services and taking a victim centred approach); the Justice System (systemic change at every level); Public Awareness and Social Marketing (to effect society change in attitude and behaviour); and Implementation and Accountability (in a timely and transparent fashion).

Sadly, not nearly enough progress has been made in effecting systemic change in countering racism in the workplace. For example, the recent federal government employment equity targets as a result of the "Embracing Change" Task Force were a step in the right direction; but we continue to hear of overt and systemic discrimination against racialized minorities 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. The Ministries of Education must again mandate and monitor the effective implementation of race and ethnocultural equity policies. And the policing services must have mandatory anti-racism and anti-discrimination or diversity training, as well as strategies for identifying and dealing with hate/bias crime and the victim impact of such crime. But support is continually being withdrawn from such programs, even as the needs are escalating. In the present 'post-multiculturalism' climate, in whether it is police, or schools, the armed forces or a government department itself, people are still fearful at every level to stand up against racism – and of losing power (whether it's a job, or elected office). As a result, we continue often to work in poisoned atmospheres, afraid to take the risk. These are all areas which a redefined and effectively marketed multiculturalism policy can and should address, strengthened by a more effective Action Plan Against Racism.[10]

Multiculturalism's impact on the fight against racism

With the creation of the Multiculturalism Department a few 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 the political will is eroding. 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 there are indications that initiatives may continue to be undermined, as the institutional memory continues to dissipate. 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 dismantling of many of provincial agencies and programs responsible for 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 those of us from equality-seeking communities be neither co-opted nor corrupted by the same quest. When we fail to remove the barriers to equality, we are easily co-opted by the same structures, and pitted against one another in the competition for power and scarce resources. This is clearly not in the spirit of the ideals of the multiculturalism policy, and we must remain vigilant to ensure that this is not the case.

Another divisive practice is the deliberate put-down of the concept of multiculturalism by anti-racism activists, when in fact there are intimate connections, historically and particularly in the legislation. One cannot be achieved without the other. For various local and provincial governments to fall into the trap of separating these concepts is to increase divisiveness in the equity seeking and social justice movement, to create competition where there should be co-operation by pitting groups against one another, and to perpetuating old hierarchical power-based structures, under the guise of creating new, more egalitarian or 'holistic' models. Witness the failure of countless "multicultural" or "race relations" or "human rights" committees or conferences when people cannot leave their organizational or political agendas behind. One of the most significant features of the recent report of the Hate Crimes Community Working Group was that it was a consensus document, using solidarity and a united front as one of the most effective strategies to make an impact on decision makers, while at the same time naming and addressing each of the forms of racism and hate crime against victimized groups.[11]

At the core of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act is the commitment to removing the many barriers to equality, racism primarily, so that ultimately all groups within Canada have equal access, equal opportunity, and equal rights, thereby becoming fully Canadian. This was the promise of the policy in 1971, and it was predicted that its implementation would lead to more loyal Canadians. It is ironic that the results of the Quebec referendum of 1995 proved this to be true, as we continued to struggle to define Canada and to achieve Canadian unity in diversity. However, the BC Referendum of 2002 truly showed the tyranny of the majority, when it comes to Aboriginal and minority rights; and the dramatic increases in racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and hate crimes in recent years reveal how far we have yet to go to put the policies into practice.

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 strong individual and group identities through effective coalitions in the interest of social cohesion and integration – the true goals of multiculturalism. Racism and racial discrimination have been acknowledged and documented as realities in Canada. We will never achieve the vision of our multicultural society until racism is eliminated. *That* is the inevitable impact of one on the other and the inextricable connection between them.

Endnotes

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[5] Henry, F., and Ginsberg, E. (1985). *Who gets the work?* Toronto: Social Planning Council and the Urban Alliance on Race Relations.

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