THE ADAMS-COHEN DEBATE ON CANADA'S IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

For the purpose of discussing multiculturalism as an ongoing ideal of Canadian identity, citizenship and national consciousness in the 21st century, this article elaborates a debate between Michael Adams in his book *Unlikely Utopia* and Andrew Cohen in his book *The Unfinished Canadian*.

> "The current identity crisis isn't about whether white, European, Christian Canada can survive the presence of 'Others'. That question has long since been resolved. Rather, it's about whether our existing multiculturalism is a tenable ideal."
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> – Michael Adams, *Unlikely Utopia*

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Debates on Canadian identity have been going on for decades, and the most recent round can be witnessed in the volleys traded between Michael Adams and Andrew Cohen in their respective publications *Unlikely Utopia* (2007) and *The Unfinished Canadian* (2007). For his part, Cohen takes stock of the Canadian national character and identity in the first decade of the new millennium. One theme that quickly emerges in his book is the idea that a shared sense of citizenship may be eroding in Canada due to a waning interest in and understanding of Canadian history, on the one hand, and a lax attitude toward instilling respect for the value of Canadian citizenship in immigrants on the other. As Cohen puts it, "citizenship can mean anything and they (immigrants) can be anything – which may mean staying who they are in custom and practice, living the way they lived, in the language they lived, in Canada rather than in China, India or Pakistan" (Cohen 2007: 157).

Alternatively, in his latest offering, pollster and author Michael Adams serves up what he describes as "a good-news story about Canadian multiculturalism" based, as many of his books are, on public opinion research produced by his firm Environics. One of the key messages of his book is that despite the ongoing challenges that Canada faces with respect to immigrant integration, linking problems in this area to the idea that Canada suffers from an eroding sense of shared citizenship – due to the lack of a strong core identity – may not be the smartest or most relevant way of framing Canadian citizenship moving forward. As Adams puts it, "a sharply defined sense of 'us' and 'them' and how to make 'them' become more like 'us' is in no way a surefire means of achieving lasting and harmonious integration" (2007: 36).

It is not our intention to revisit the history of this debate in Canada, although the significance of Canadian history is a factor in the Adams-Cohen comparison we elaborate. Instead, we focus here on the future of Canadian identity and diversity in terms of what ideal might best frame Canadian citizenship in the 21st century. Cohen and Adams appear to have provided us with a context, not simply because they have adopted opposite positions but because, at different points in their respective books, they actually take each other on. Cohen devotes the better part of a chapter in his book to savaging Adams' 2003 book *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values* and Adams, with less rhetorical flourish, criticizes Cohen for his doom and gloom outlook in *The Unfinished Canadian*. For our part, we attempt to make use of this interchange to highlight the question of the relevance of Canadian multiculturalism to the current and future challenges of Canadian identity, democracy and national self-understanding.

Adams

Adams describes Canadian identity as a perennial issue, but a particularly thorny one at the moment in light of broader international concerns about terrorism, security and the successful integration of Muslim immigrants in Western liberal democracies. At the same time, however, he suggests that, next to countries like Britain, France and the Netherlands, Canada should be much more able to address issues of trust and empathy across lines of ethnocultural and religious difference without

misconstruing such challenges as a threat to national identity. In this way, he seeks to remind the reader that Canada never was "a unitary entity."

Perhaps the most enlightening portion of Adams' book is a chapter featuring the first-ever survey of Muslims living in Canada. In the winter of 2006-2007, Environics polled the opinions and attitudes of Canadian Muslims, and the findings appear to tell a very positive story, one that seems almost contradictory to the story one might have strung together from media headlines of the same period. Specifically, Adams' survey reveals "that seven in ten Canadian Muslims believe that their fellow Muslims are interested in integrating into the 'Canadian way of life' – either while maintaining a distinct Muslim identity or not" (Adams 2007: 93). Moreover, 94% say that they are proud to be Canadian. For our purposes, however, the most telling response of the survey is reported by Adams in the following way (*Ibid.*):

> When we ask Canadian Muslims what characteristics of this country make them proud to be Canadian, their answers mirror the responses of the population at large. Muslim Canadians tell us that they're proud of Canadian freedom, democracy, multiculturalism, the fact that Canada is a peaceful country, the idea that Canada is a caring and friendly country and the fact that Canada is a safe place to live.

This response may be significant insofar as it provides a description of the common ground of Canadian citizenship, a common ground shared between Canadian Muslims and the broader population of the country. Without reading too much into this, we can at least identify the link between Canadian democracy and multiculturalism. In other words, one key element of shared citizenship in this country appears to be the acknowledgment that multiculturalism, in part, gives democracy its uniquely Canadian expression. Furthermore, this common ground seems to be based on day-to-day relations among and between citizens, or what Adams refers to as the "quiet heroism of getting along." What seems noticeably absent, especially in comparison with European democracies, is the need for a strong common identity – common ground seems to be replacing it, in other words, in the Canadian case.

In *Unlikely Utopia*, Adams cites Andrew Cohen's belief that Canadian identity is "becoming very flimsy" because immigrants to Canada think of this country as a hotel, railway station or simply the convergence of "a hundred diasporas" (Adams 2007: 34). For Cohen it is a question of not only eroding identity but also an eroding sense of loyalty to Canada. What seems to underlie Cohen's perspective is the argument that Canadian multiculturalism not only promotes a society segregated along ethnic lines but also one in which newcomers fail to respect the value of Canadian citizenship and adopt the appropriate degree of loyalty to the country. In response to this position, Adams writes (*Ibid.*):

> Whether Cohen counts Canadians of European ancestry who spend their winters in Florida or Arizona among the ranks of unworthy fair-weather Canadians isn't clear. In listing the symptoms of our inadequate coherence as a nation, he mentions only "Jamaican, Haitian, and other street gangs," "Indo-Canadian(s)," "Muslims" and "Somalis," and of course Canadian citizens who were evacuated from Lebanon during the 2006 Israeli bombing, who Cohen says treat Canada as a taxi service.

In criticizing multiculturalism and minority rights policies in the broader context of democratic citizenship and identity, such critics put themselves in the awkward position of having to infer – if not proclaim explicitly – that there may be something about the ethnic minority focus of multiculturalism that is undemocratic and destabilizing for the larger society.

Adams, of course, takes time to explain why multiculturalism should not, and indeed cannot, be blamed for society's immigrant integration problems. But more than this, he elevates the question of multiculturalism beyond the context of scapegoat to the notion of citizenship ideal. In doing so, he challenges us to consider the ethnic dimension of Cohen's position in the larger context of Canadian democracy.

Cohen's position appears to be in line with what Will Kymlicka identifies as an "eroding citizenship-critique" of minority rights and multiculturalism. As Kymlicka explains it, for years the central critique of multiculturalism and minority rights theory had been based on the argument that jus-tice requires state institutions to be "colour-blind," and, therefore, the onus remained firmly on proponents of minority rights "to show that deviations from difference-blind rules that are adopted in order to accommodate ethnocultural differences are not inherently unjust" (2007a: 42). But he explains that this onus has shifted in recent years as Western democracies in particular have come to recognize, at least in theory if not always in practice, the legitimacy of minority rights and policies with respect to both immigrant multiculturalism and self-government for national minorities. Within this emerging discourse, Kymlicka claims that "the burden of proof" is much more balanced now in terms of defenders of so-called colour-blind institutions having to demonstrate that maintaining such institutional arrangements will not lead to injustices for minority groups. And this emerging balance has, in turn, forced critics of multiculturalism and minority rights to re-group.

Since opponents of multiculturalism can no longer rely on a justice-based critique, many have adopted a concern for "stability" rather than "justice." As Kymlicka puts it, "critics focus not on the justice or injustice of particular policies but rather on the way that the general trend towards minority rights threatens to erode the sorts of civic virtues, identities and practices that sustain a healthy democracy" (*Ibid.*: 46). However, in criticizing multiculturalism and minority rights policies in the broader context of democratic citizenship and identity, such critics put themselves in the awkward position of having to infer – if not proclaim explicitly – that there may be something about the ethnic minority focus of multiculturalism that is undemocratic and destabilizing for the larger society. This is an awkward position because it seems to, at the same time, force them to emphasize that the roots of Canadian democracy are European roots. In other words, adopting an eroding-citizenship critique of multiculturalism seems to require that a corresponding emphasis be placed on the ethnonational origins of Canadian democratic values and institutions. This approach is well articulated by Philip Resnick (2005: 61) in the following way:

> Canada is not a blank slate to be reinvented with each new immigrant or group of immigrants that arrives at our airports. Its underlying political and social values are ultimately European derived ones: peace, order and good government, constituted authority, political community, individual liberty and citizenship equality.

In effect, what this position amounts to is the denial that multiculturalism may represent a truly Canadian (post-colonial/non-European) democratic innovation. And this is a rather ironic outcome for certain critics of multiculturalism because it may represent an attempt on their part to "ethnicize" democracy itself. What the "eroding citizenship critique" seems to suggest is that multiculturalism is an ideal for ethnic minorities that may be divisive, destabilizing and ultimately undemocratic; whereas liberal democracy and its underlying principles are uniquely European (particularly British and French).

Cohen

Andrew Cohen is consistent with the eroding-citizenship critique. He argues that Canada is a nation unwilling to strive for (or even accept) greatness, that its history is not known or celebrated and that it demands too little "allegiance" from its citizens. Cohen divides his argument into chapters that look at different facets of Canadian identity – approach to citizenship, perception by outsiders, understanding of Canadian history, relationship with the United States, the development of the National Capital Region and so on – as mini "case studies" of how Canadian identity has evolved and where it is lacking. In short, he laments a great deal about Canada and leaves little space for celebration or pride. But what is most provocative in all of this is that Cohen (2007: 5) makes no attempt to be objective:

> A study like this, which makes no claims to be comprehensive, is limited by its very nature. How to assign elements of character to a diverse, eclectic country of almost 33 million souls? How to decide which to include? Is our character not to have a character, as some suggest? The approach here is to draw on contemporary examples from our political and civic life, as well as our history. A disclaimer: this book is unscientific, selective and subjective. In offering examples, it makes no claim to regional, linguistic or ethnic balance. It has commissioned no surveys, though it occasionally draws on them. Nor does it present a statistical portrait of Canada, much as statistics are sometimes useful, too.

Cohen's attitude makes for a light and entertaining read at first. But in chapter three, the author appears to embrace a more sustained argument and entrench his point of view alongside that of outspoken historian J. L. Granatstein, famous for his claim that history is no longer taught properly in Canada (*Ibid.*: 51). Granatstein's well-worn thesis is that Canadian history is no longer taught "positively" in the sense of promoting national pride and patriotism, the kind of approach that would have for its goal the enhancement of a more European-style national identity. As Cohen quotes Granatstein (*Ibid.*: 52):

> Canada must be one of the few nations in the world, certainly one of the few Western industrialized states, that does not make an effort to teach its history positively and thoroughly to its young people….It must be one of the few political entities to overlook its own cultural traditions – the European civilization on which our nation is founded – on the grounds that they would systematically discriminate against those who come from other cultures.

Not only is Canadian history not taught "positively" for Cohen, but also this failing should be linked to the so-called political correctness of multiculturalism. In making such associations, Cohen elevates what appear at first to be purely subjective musings to a more sustained defence of the kind of polemic that figures like Granatstein have championed in recent years with respect to blaming multiculturalism for the lack of a strong Canadian national consciousness.

For his part, Cohen wants history books to be full of biographies, royal celebrities, and national glories since, "that's what good historians do" (*Ibid.*: 88-89). But the state of the Canadian history profession and the politics of its identity are more complex and nuanced than Cohen, and perhaps Granatstein, may be willing to admit. A. B. McKillop, as cited in Cohen's book, criticizes Granatstein's approach, in particular where he states that:

> In the interest of polemic, Granatstein… misrepresents the purpose of scholarship and distorts the nature and quality of academic historical writing. In doing so, he puts forward a conception of Canada's 'national' history that is no better suited to serve national self-understanding than the scholarship he dismisses (*Ibid.*: 53).

National self-understanding is precisely what is at stake in these arguments and, increasingly in the 21st century, this needs to be addressed in the context of the future of Canada's identity and diversity. It cannot be ignored, in other words, that the current and future significance of multiculturalism as a tenable citizenship ideal in Canada is seriously at issue. Nonetheless, Cohen (2006) appears to be fixated on the past rather than the future:

> In Canada, where the provinces are responsible for education, no one teaches Canadian history any more. Captured by the canons of political correctness, schools celebrate multiculturalism as an end in itself, failing to teach the superiority of civic nationalism over ethnic nationalism. In the voiceless country, no one speaks for Canada any more.

Yet in describing the dynamics of history and education in Canada in such a stark, rhetorical fashion, Cohen clearly constructs a framework wherein multiculturalism is characterized as un-Canadian and linked to ethnic nationalism while civic nationalism is portrayed as Canadian and linked to European civilization. What is missing from this overly polemical framework is a more balanced understanding of the evolution of Canadian democratic institutions and the link to a post-colonial Canadian identity. Cohen refers to the European origin of Canadian values and institutions; but, in denying the Canadianness of multiculturalism outright, he dismisses an important post-colonial Canadian value and innovation. In other words, multiculturalism as a value and national symbol, one that is entrenched in the Constitution and given practical expression through federal and provincial legislation, must be seen as a modern (post-colonial/non-European) democratic innovation in Canada, one that is not only guided and constrained by liberal democratic rights and freedoms but also designed to enhance the Canadian expression of civic citizenship.

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A useful illustration of how Cohen obscures the democratic elements of post-colonial Canadian symbols may be found in his treatment of "Canada Day," which he refers to as "a term of crushing banality" (2007: 90). Cohen prefers the former "Dominion Day." Inaugurating Canada Day was in fact the outcome of years of debate on Canadian identity politics and how the federal government and various stakeholders had sought to represent modern Canada through an inclusive, unifying celebration. Yet, Cohen says that this was done "just like that," because a single Member of Parliament decided that the name of this day was a "colonial remnant, an insult to Quebec and multicultural Canada" (*Ibid.*: 89). Cohen narrates how the bill was shuttled quickly through the House of Commons on a summer day in July 1982 when quorum was lacking. Cohen sees this as a travesty, an act of "historical cleansing." He claims that the term "Dominion" did not have colonial connotations – pointing to the fact that the term was taken from Psalm 72 in the Old Testament.

What Cohen does not say is that the designation for July 1st had been discussed since 1946, when the first such bill to change the name of the day was introduced in Parliament. Indeed, dozens of bills were introduced between 1946 and 1982 to change the name, both private members' bills and government-sponsored ones. There were decades of debate over what term to use for July 1st. "Dominion" was contentious, especially in Quebec and among new Canadians of non-British origin. There was good cause for thinking it was a colonial term, and the fact that it came from a religious text should constitute enough ground that "Dominion" is not an inclusive word for all Canadians. The name was changed democratically and took over 35 years of debate. What is worrisome in Cohen's disregard for the facts in this example, however, is, again, an apparent disrespect for the modern Canadian process of national self-understanding, one divorced from so-called European roots but equally, if not more, democratic.

Finally, in terms of Cohen's criticisms of Adams' book *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values* (2003), what seems to irk Cohen the most with respect to Adams' thesis – that there may be a significant cultural divergence separating Canadians from Americans in the realm of social values – is that Adams is perpetuating comforting Canadian myths of moral superiority that simply don't hold up under scrutiny. Chief amongst these myths is multiculturalism or, rather, the hackneyed notion that Canada is a mosaic whereas America is a melting pot. Cohen (2007: 115-118) describes this as a conceit that allows Canadians to feel self-righteous about permitting immigrants to retain their language and customs in comparison to the ugly business of American assimilation. Cohen is now very convincing at this point in his critique of Adams, and he makes a valid and well-supported argument that America is not, in fact, the melting pot that Canadians think it is – it, too, is more of a mosaic. In this way, Cohen's chiding of Canadians for adopting a superior attitude toward Americans on this front resonates. But what Cohen does not prove is that multiculturalism is an inappropriate and undemocratic Canadian mythology.

Conclusion

It is important for Canadians, and particularly young Canadians, to know the history of Canada, including the origins of its social, political and economic institutions. In terms of national self-understanding in the 21st century, however, our consideration of the Adams-Cohen debate

suggests that the evolution of Canada's democratic institutions may be just as important as their origins and that greater respect for and understanding of multiculturalism, in particular, may be increasingly important to the future of this country's identity. As the saying goes, history may be a good teacher but it is a lousy master. In *Unlikely Utopia*, Michael Adams suggests that we have too easily allowed multiculturalism to take the blame for Canada's social ills and lack of national identity; we have failed to respond when journalists, in their cavalier fashion, describe multiculturalism as a doctrine that separates people along ethnic and religious lines for the sake of celebrating such divisions. In response to this, Adams asserts (2007: 10-11):

> In Canada multiculturalism has *always* been geared toward helping minority groups participate more fully in Canadian society – not to helping them opt out…the idea that Canada needs to stop encouraging ethno-cultural segregation and start encouraging integration is something that has already occurred to the country's political leaders; indeed, it occurred to – and was advanced by – the very people who were the architects of this country's multiculturalism policy.

The Adams-Cohen debate, as we have presented it, is increasingly relevant to moving forward a public discourse on Canada's citizenship ideal. Does Canada's existing multiculturalism continue to be a tenable ideal in this context? Although we lean toward a positive response to this question here in this article, we are more interested in sparking debate than in making ultimate claims. For the sake of encouraging further discussion, we would, in conclusion, like to make some links to the international discourse in this area.

In his most recent book *Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity*, Kymlicka claims that something substantial has changed in the international community through the rhetoric and declarations of international intergovernmental organizations, such that the ideal of a so-called normal state model has shifted away from the centralized and homogenous model of the past toward a "liberal multicultural" ideal. Throughout much of the 20th century, he states, the most influential example of a so-called normal state was France: "i.e. a highly centralized state with an undifferentiated conception of republican citizenship and single official language" (2007b: 42). In this model there is no room for minority rights and policies. But this has changed dramatically according to Kymlicka since the 1990s, and the best example in Europe is the European Union decision to make respect for minority rights one of the accession criteria for would-be members. NATO, of course, has made this a factor for new membership as well. And what Kymlicka sees in this shift is a moral redefinition of the modern state ideal wherein "denying the existence of minorities or treating them as politically inconsequential is seen as evidence that one is not yet ready to become a member in good standing of the club of liberal democracies" (*Ibid.*: 43).

What this suggests, if Kymlicka is accurate in his assessment of the current and future trend toward liberal multiculturalism amongst international intergovernmental organizations, is that Canada would have to be considered a forerunner of this emerging international state ideal in much the same way that France was the model of a bygone era. Amidst such an international trend, with Canada apparently at the forefront, isn't it more than quaint that Canadians like Andrew Cohen continue to yearn for a 20th century, European-style national consciousness in this country?

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