CHALLENGES TO CANADIAN MULTICULTURALISM: The Case of Black Montreal

BY Peter F. Flegel

FOR OVER THE LAST DECADE, MOST CANADIANS HAVE BELIEVED THAT CANADA WAS A 'MODEL MULTICULTURAL AND DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY' IN WHICH ALL CITIZENS COULD PARTICIPATE FULLY IN THE SOCIAL, CULTURAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LIFE OF THE COUNTRY. THE LOFTY PRINCIPLES AND GOALS EXTOLLED WITHIN THE *CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS*, THE *MULTICULTURALISM ACT*, THE *EMPLOYMENT EQUITY ACT* AND THE *CANADIAN RACE RELATIONS FOUNDATION ACT*, ATTESTED TO THE COUNTRY'S ABILITY TO PROTECT TRADITIONALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS FROM DISCRIMINATION AND TO EMPOWER THEM TO PARTICIPATE IN CANADIAN SOCIETY AS EQUALS. MOST RECENTLY, THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT REAFFIRMED THIS VIEW DURING ITS PREPARATIONS FOR AND PARTICIPATION IN THE WORLD CONFERENCE AGAINST RACISM THAT TOOK PLACE IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA LAST AUGUST. FOR EXAMPLE, IN AN OFFICIAL (AUGUST, 2001) DOCUMENT PRESENTING CANADA'S APPROACH TO THE WCAR, THE GOVERNMENT AFFIRMED ITS POSITION THAT THE COUNTRY HAD "REACHED A UNIQUE BALANCE BETWEEN NURTURING DIVERSITY AND ENSURING AN INCLUSIVE SOCIETY, BASED ON EQUALITY AND THE ABILITY OF ALL MEMBERS OF SOCIETY TO REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL."

Despite this confidence in Canadian multiculturalism, the representatives of the Canadian government went to South Africa oblivious of one of the country's 'dirtiest secrets.' Behind the veneer of multicultural policies and legal protections for racialized groups was (and still is) concealed the suffering, widespread poverty and inequity faced by a significant group in Canada: Black Canadians. Most attempts to account for this problem have relied on "culturalist" explanations. For example, Black community organizations have been exhorted to focus on providing group members with the 'social capital' necessary to compete effectively on the job market. The possibility that racial discrimination is part of the problem is often dismissed on the grounds that the existence of various legal statutes and recourses for victims of racism demonstrate that racism no longer exists in Canada. In other words, with Canada's commitment to multiculturalism, how could racism persist today?

The recent publishing of an extensive study on the demographics of Montreal's Black community demonstrates the fallacy of these assumptions and raises serious questions about Canadian multiculturalism as an effective framework and tool to promote cultural diversity and empower minority groups to participate fully in the shaping and evolution of the country. Despite its admirable values and meritorious commitments, Canadian multiculturalism has clearly failed to live up to its expectations. Nonetheless, a renewed and more efficient multiculturalism policy is required in order to achieve a significant change in the lives of Black Canadians in general and Black Montrealers in particular.

As other articles in this magazine have explored, Multiculturalism as a framework guiding Canadian public policy and as a goal to be pursued by the state, emerged towards the end of the 1960s when a separatist movement was gaining momentum in Quebec. Realizing the threat that it posed to Canadian unity, the Pearson government appointed the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism to explore the problems of French-English relations and formulate a series of recommendations designed to alleviate the problem. Among its main recommendations, the commission's report suggested that non-British or French ethnic groups should be *integrated* into Canadian society through the provision of citizenship rights and participation in the basic institutional structure of the country. Acting on the recommendations, Prime Minister Trudeau ratified his



Courtesy Department of Canadian Heritage

multiculturalism policy in 1971: the *Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework*. The main objectives were to encourage interethnic 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. The government sought to achieve those goals by creating a Directorate within the Department of the Secretary of State and a Ministry of Multiculturalism in the early 1970s (Hawkins, 1988).

During the 1980s, Canadian multiculturalism policy was institutionalized through programs designed to help Canadian institutions adapt to the presence of the new immigrant groups and to combat discrimination in the workforce. This process culminated in the adoption of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982. Among the many rights and fundamental freedoms that were guaranteed in the Charter were provisions to address the discrimination faced by many ethnic and visible minorities in Canada. Among these, Section 15(1) stipulated:

> *Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin...*

Recognizing that certain measures might be required to compensate for the discrimination faced by minority groups, the Charter also made provision for affirmative action programs. Regarding the multicultural character of the country, Section 27 affirmed: "This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians." This clause enshrined multiculturalism as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and mandated the Courts to consider multiculturalism as a factor to be considered at all levels of decision-making (Leman, 1999).

Following the ratification of the Charter, the country continued its commitment to multicultural policy and legislation through the drafting of a report on multiculturalism, Equality Now, by the Special Parliamentary Committee on Visible Minorities in 1984, and the creation of a House of Commons Standing Committee on Multiculturalism in 1985. Recognizing that certain ethnic groups were disadvantaged in the labor market, the government implemented an *Employment Equity Act* in 1986; it was designed to provide four disadvantaged groups – women, the disabled, Aboriginal peoples, and visible minorities – with equal access to employment opportunities. By 1987, the Committee was calling for the enactment of a new policy on Multiculturalism and the creation of the Department of Multiculturalism. As a result, a new multiculturalism policy, the *Multiculturalism Act*, was put into effect and adopted by the Parliament in July 1988. The policy affirmed that multiculturalism was a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and that it should play an integral role in governmental decision-making processes at the federal and provincial levels. Particular emphasis was placed on the government's role in ensuing that federal institutions enabled minorities to have equal employment opportunities. For example, Section 3(2)a declared that "all federal institutions shall ensure that Canadians of all origins have an equal opportunity to obtain employment and advancement in those institutions..." Despite its emphasis on federal institutions, the government was also exhorted to encourage and assist the private sector to "be both respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character" in order to ensure the full participation of minority groups (Section 3(2)f; Section 5(1)d) (Magsino, 2000).

In 1991, Parliament adopted legislation mandating the creation of a Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship whose programs would seek to promote acceptance and implementation of the principles of multiculturalism and racial equality, help Canadians enhance, preserve and share their cultural and linguistic heritage within the larger society, and facilitate the full and equitable participation of racial and ethnocultural minorities in Canadian society. Despite its high objectives, the Department was dismantled in 1993 and its programs were incorporated into a larger Department of Canadian Heritage. Nonetheless, a Secretary of State of Multiculturalism was appointed within the Minister of Canadian Heritage. By 1995, the Secretary of State modified and refined the objectives of Canadian Multiculturalism by focusing its programs on building a fair and equitable society, fostering the civic participation of all Canadians, and facilitating the development of a society which reflects, respects and recognizes cultural and ethnic diversity. The purpose was to ensure that people of all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging to Canada. At the same time, the Secretary of State announced the establishment of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, dedicated to encouraging research on and disseminating information about strategies to eliminate racism and racial discrimination in Canada (Magsino, 2000).

With such a rich history of multicultural policies, employment equity programs, and other forms of legislation designed to enhance and protect the multicultural character of Canadian society, one would expect that the living conditions of traditionally disadvantaged and marginalized groups would have improved significantly. Unfortunately, as a demographic profile of Montreal's Black community reveals, this is not the case.

Based on data from the 1996 Canadian census, the study – "The Evolution of the Black Community of

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Montreal: Change and Challenge" – paints a bleak picture of Black Montreal. Blacks in Montreal earn an average of $15,397 compared with $24,625 for Montrealers as a whole, and 72% of the Black community earn less than $20,000. Fifty-seven percent of the Black community compared with only 26% of non-Blacks lives in poverty. The situation is worse among Black women and Black youth: 60% of Black women live in poverty and over 66% of Black children are living below the poverty line. Regarding employment opportunities, twenty-one percent of Blacks in the labor force compared to 33% of non-Blacks work as full time employees, and Blacks with full time jobs earn on average 30% less than the average for full time employees in Montreal. Blacks are 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed than non-Blacks, and 26.5% of Blacks compared to 10.7% of non-Blacks are unemployed (Torczyner and Springer).

Despite allegations that these figures represent that Black Montrealers are unable to fully integrate into Canadian society, the evidence suggests that other factors are to be blamed. For example, one of the most alarming findings is that a Black university graduate is more likely to be unemployed than a non-Black person who has not graduated from high school. In fact, at every educational level, Blacks are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as their non-Black counterparts (Torczyner and Springer). Thus, issues surrounding racism and racial discrimination seem to be involved.

The effects of these disadvantages are being felt on many levels: the rise of gang-related activity among youth, the increasing number of children attending school without having eaten a meal in the morning, increased economic strain on families that are already impacted by a breakdown in the traditional family structure and generational and cultural tensions between parents and children. An increasing number of youths are wondering whether the pursuit of postsecondary education has any worth given the possibility that they will not be able to find jobs. Black civic participation has diminished significantly; according to a recent informal poll conducted in November, less than twenty percent of eligible Black voters exercised their right during the recent municipal elections, compared with close to fifty percent of eligible non-Black Montreal voters (poll conducted at campaign office of Reverend Darryl Gray).

The case of Montreal's Black community raises serious questions about the efficacy and future of Canadian multiculturalism policy. Clearly, the desire to promote the idea that "multiculturalism... provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada's future," the attempt to ensure the "full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in... the shaping of ... Canadian society and ... [assisting] them in the elimination of any barrier to such participation" and the aim of encouraging and helping "the social, cultural, economic and political institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character," are still mere aspirations. Two decades of multiculturalism legislation, projects and programs have yet to yield the equitable and multicultural society that is championed by so many Canadians. In fact, the evidence suggests that "invisible barriers" in Canadian society are disempowering traditionally disadvantaged groups, limiting their ability to shape the evolution of all aspects of Canadian society, and contributing to a reluctance to help decide the political future of their country. At a more fundamental level, the daunting disparities between Black and non-Black Montrealers suggest that true Canadian citizenship – an ideal encompassing the provision of social, civic and political rights, a series of civic activities designed to actualize these rights, and a sense of belonging to the larger Canadian political community (Kymlicka and Norman, 2000) – is still but an abstraction for Montreal's Black community; their rights are still truncated by barriers that place them behind their non-Black counterparts in a number of areas and dissuade them from identifying fully with Canadian society.

It is important to stress, however, that the principles of Canadian Multiculturalism are not to blame. In fact, as many point out, the values of equality of opportunity and a group's right to maintain its ethnocultural heritage concur with the basic needs of Montreal's Black community. The problem, however, lies in the ways in which these principles or goals are implemented. Without venturing into a detailed account of the problems with the current approaches to Multiculturalism, government cut backs in the Department of Canadian Heritage, increased limits on the clout of the Secretary of State (Multiculturalism – Status of Women), and an approach to employment equity which focuses primarily on the public sector rather than incorporating the private sector and unions within its jurisdiction, seem to be involved. What is needed to rectify the problem is a renewed approach to formulating and implementing multiculturalism policy and programs that involve (i) greater discussions on the strengths and weakness of Canadian multiculturalism policy as it affects Black Canadians in general and Black Montrealers in particular, (ii) on areas in which policy and its implementation should be improved; a more coordinated approach to the implementation of multiculturalism policy; and (iii) greater leadership and activism by representatives of Montreal's and the rest of Canada's Black communities. Central to this process is collaboration among different federal and provincial governmental departments, the Canadian and Quebec Human Rights Commissions and Tribunals, unions, the private sector and key players working in the Black community in Montreal and across the country. It is only through such a joint effort pursued according to the fundamental principles of Canadian multiculturalism, human rights, and democracy that the ideal of a multicultural and equal society can be achieved in Canada.

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