REDEFINING THE CANADIAN DEMOS:

Towards a Trans-Cultural Citizenship Charter

By Joanna Anneke Rummens

THIRTY YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE CANADA'S MULTICULTURAL POLICY WAS FIRST ARTICULATED AND PRESENTED IN OUR PARLIAMENT AS A MODEL FOR THE INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANT ETHNIC COMMUNITIES. ITS IMPETUS LAY IN THE NEGATIVE RESPONSE OF ETHNO-CULTURAL MINORITIES TO THE MANDATE OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON BILINGUALISM AND BICULTURALISM SET UP IN 1963 IN RESPONSE TO THE GROWING ASSERTIVENESS OF FRENCH-CANADIAN POLITICAL NATIONALISM. REACTING AGAINST A BILINGUAL, BICULTURAL POLICY THEY FOUND OFFENSIVE TO NON-CHARTER ETHNIC GROUPS AND WHICH THEY FEARED WOULD RELEGATE THEM TO THE STATUS OF SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS, AND INSPIRED BY THE LEGITIMACY GIVEN THE CULTURAL CLAIMS OF FRENCH-CANADIANS, ORGANIZED SEGMENTS OF OTHER ETHNO-CULTURAL GROUPS – THE ALLEGED THIRD FORCE – DEMANDED EQUAL TREATMENT. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT RESPONDED ON OCTOBER 8, 1971, BY OFFICIALLY ANNOUNCING A POLICY OF *MULTICULTURALISM WITHIN A BILINGUAL* FRAMEWORK. ITS TWOFOLD GOALS WOULD BE TO BREAK-DOWN DISCRIMINATORY ATTITUDES AND CULTURAL JEALOUSIES AND THEREBY FOSTER UNITY AMONG CANADIANS OF DIFFERENT CULTURAL ORIGINS. THE PROPOSED MECHANISM – AND UNDERLYING ASSUMPTION – WAS THAT GREATER SELF-ESTEEM REGARDING ONE'S OWN CULTURE WOULD LEAD TO A GREATER TOLERANCE OF THAT OF OTHERS. BOTH THE INITIAL POLICY STATEMENT AND LATER ACT ARTICULATED A VISION OF INCLUSION AND INCORPORATION INTO CANADIAN SOCIETY BY ALL ON AN EQUAL BASIS, AND SOUGHT TO LAY THE FOUNDATIONS OF A SOCIETY "BASED ON FAIR PLAY FOR ALL."



Courtesy Department of Canadian Heritage

That Canada has always been linguistically and culturally heterogeneous throughout its relatively short history is well established. Our country's plurality of distinct, often unique, cultures is a social reality to which each successive wave of newcomers has had in turn to adapt. Multiculturalism in Canada thus exists first and foremost as a demonstrable **fact**. Multiculturalism is, however, also clearly an **ideology** comprised of shared assumptions and normative statements about what "ought" to govern our social interaction and discourse. It rests on the primary assumptions that individuals from culturally diverse groupings within Canada actually see themselves as different and that they collectively wish to remain so for instrumental or expressive purposes. As official ideology it also asserts that no one culture is inherently better than another and that all should be celebrated equally. In envisioning a culturally plural society guided by principles of freedom, equality, tolerance and respect for individual differences, it furthermore prescribes a preferred course of action. The belief that Canada's socio-cultural pluralism must be actively managed to derive maximum benefit is evident in the articulation of Multiculturalism as state **policy**, as well as its subsequent implementation in the form of various **programme** initiatives. It thus emerges as a prescription for interethnic harmony in complex, culturally diverse societies.

Over the course of these past three decades, Multiculturalism policy and programmatic initiatives have largely realized the transition from expected assimilation to a celebration of diversity, and from cultural pluralism viewed as problem to an incipient awareness of its potential as an important resource. What began as an initial laissez-faire approach has turned into increased government regulation of

identity, commonality and pluralism. Increasingly the emphasis has also shifted from a focus on culture per se to increased concerns regarding institutional and organizational structures. These trends have been driven in large part by changing population demographics that have translated into important power shifts among groups. As such the management of Canada's pluralism has been informed by identity politics: identity construction or negotiation on the part of social actors, and the politics of recognition at both the public and official level. In response the official management of Canada's diversity has seen a sequential shift from concerns about language and culture, to an increased awareness of racial and religious differences, particularly in the years preceding the establishment of the Multiculturalism Act itself. The current discourse focuses on identity, civic participation and social justice, as well as on the exploration of other dimensions of diversity such as age, gender, dis/ability and sexual orientation. Throughout these transformations the biggest apparent challenge has been the conceptualization and articulation of a Canadian national identity.



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Official recognition of Canada's linguistic, cultural, racial and religious diversity has been invaluable. By establishing that Canada's non-charter ethno-cultural groups are not a transitory phenomenon nor simply "overflow" cultures, Multiculturalism has transformed formerly excluded individuals and groups into important stakeholders. It also underwrites the continuing role of ethnic communities in the resettlement and social integration of newcomer immigrants and refugees, thereby supporting a liberal immigration policy that has one of the highest intakes in the world. As such it both reflects and supports the growing demographic complexity of our country. More importantly, the commitment to peaceful co-existence based on tolerance first articulated in the initial 1971 Multicultural Policy Statement gave rise to a series of subsequent human rights challenges that directly informed the formulation of the 1988 *Multiculturalism Act* and of the 1992 *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* itself.

Both the policy and its programmatic implementations have nevertheless been critiqued for promoting an essentialist, flash-frozen notion of culture that emphasizes the celebration of ancestral origin and traditions over truly lived cultural lifeways. This limited view of culture as a preserved phenomenon has lead some to claim that the policy's expressed interest in ethnicity is largely symbolic. Others go one step further to argue that official Multiculturalism values the superficial while forcing new immigrants to conform to the exotic image that the dominant society imposes on them; others, that it promotes differences but is unable to handle them because it is unwilling to accept any true social, economic or political equality among Canada's diverse population groups. The policy's implied and continued emphasis on "the ethnics" is also seen as limited: Canada's culturally diverse aboriginal First Nations peoples become entirely invisible while the often dueling socio-cultural and politico-economic hegemonies of Canada's founding charter groups disappear behind simple linguistic difference. Finally, whether through intent or latent function, the directional focusing of individuals' identifications and involvement towards the activities, interests and concerns of their respective ethno-cultural communities is sometimes felt to both exacerbate separation between various cultural communities and discourage greater participation in the wider Canadian public arena, thereby further undermining the policy's expressed unity goal.

Canada's Multiculturalism policy encourages strong identification of Canadians with their ancestral ethnic group origins while at the same time encouraging private, individual *choice of identity*. At the same time the policy also encourages identification with Canada and Canadian citizenship, both vital to Canadian *unity*. This apparent contradiction gives rise to a number of important questions:

First, is multi-culturalism – understood as socio-cultural pluralism as opposed to political pluralism – compatible with either patriotism or *national unity*? While Canada's Multicultural Policy sees no incompatibility between the maintenance of ethno-cultural traditions and its expressed goals of social cohesion and unity, the actual mechanism by which to achieve a hither-to elusive sense of national unity seems not yet to have been worked out in full.

Second, where and how does *national identity* fit in? Given the policy's identity trajectory from language, culture, race and religion to current considerations of their intersections with other identity markers, how exactly do we move from our rather

complex accommodation of diversity to the construction of a shared sense of national identity?

Third, can a policy promoting "cultural diversity within political unity" continue to serve as the foundation of a post-modern nation state? The assumption underlying multicultural ideology is that it can; Canada's thirty-year experiment would also appear to support this claim. The question however takes on special urgency in a new world order characterized by increased economic interdependence, geographical mobility and information flow.

In brief, how might we best resolve issues of national unity and identity in an evolving supra-national context of globalization, transnationalism, and technological transformation?

The management of Canada's diversity remains a challenging balancing act between uniformity and heterogeneity, individual rights and collective rights, symmetry and asymmetry (Jenson and Papillon 2001). The emphasis to-date has been on diversity, understood as heterogeneity; the apparent challenge is now unity, often erroneously equated with uniformity. While our commitment to equality suggests a need for symmetry, our commitment to "fair play" often leaves us grappling with asymmetrical solutions. Similarly the policy's explicit focus on individual rights presents the matter of collective rights as seemingly problematic. Throughout this exercise in social integration our primary focus has been on examining the various ways in which Canadians differ from each other in an effort to best accommodate the most salient distinctions in the interest of social harmony. What we have not yet figured out however, is how to make everyone different in the same kind of way, or the same in a different kind of way.

The attempt to achieve "unity in diversity" has been stymied by two erroneous assumptions. The first is that while accommodation of pluralism may be useful in maintaining social cohesion, uniformity – defined as "sameness" – is required to ensure a truly meaningful sense of national unity. This assumed inherent tension between unity and diversity arises out of a faulty equation: homogeneity or uniformity (=unity) versus heterogeneity (=diversity). The reasoning is as follows: given that uniformity does not equal heterogeneity (they are in fact polar opposites on a continuum); since heterogeneity is synonymous with diversity, and diversity is not the same thing as unity, uniformity must equal unity, an illogical conclusion reached entirely by default. A second stumbling block is the common assumption that primary cultural and national identifications must necessarily overlap. They are instead based on quite different identity criteria that are not necessarily mutually exclusive: the former deals with shared history, values, traditions and lifeways usually supported and transferred through language, the latter with geographically bound, largely autonomous, self-governing political entities. The assumption 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.

At issue is, do we really need to share a shared Canadian culture in order to have a common civic identity as Canadians? The answer is no. Civil societies do not need to be bound by a *complete* set of common values, traditions and shared history. What they do need is individual allegiance and active commitment to the continued development of a shared politico-economic community guided by shared core values and principles. This in turn then forms the basis of a national identity firmly rooted in participatory citizenship. The solution is to simply decouple culture and nation, and to redefine nation in terms of citizenship. Shared commonality of citizenship then becomes the basis for national unity and ultimately – with time – national identity.

The true mediation between unity and diversity is commonality, not sameness. In the state's regulation of identity, commonality and pluralism, it is our *commonality* that has received short shrift. What we are now left grappling with is what defines, supports and guides us as a unique social, political and economic entity. While the current renewed diversity discourse represents both a healthy and logical extension of multi-culturalism per se in its exploration of the various intersections of language, culture, race and religion with age, gender, class, dis/ability and sexual orientation, it is important to balance an official recognition of differences with a consideration of what we in fact have in common. While it remains both constructive and morally imperative to continue to accommodate difference in the interests of social integration, cohesion and justice, eventually we will need to venture beyond our various definitions of 'the Other' to also focus on our common commitment and sense of belonging. In short, we need to move from a sometimes myopic preoccupation with the numerous ways in which we are all different to an examination of what we have in common as the foundation for our shared citizenship.

The time has come to draft a **Citizenship Charter** that both embraces and transcends our linguistic, cultural, "racial," and religious differences. Such a Charter would articulate our society's overarching core values and locate the *responsibilities* of common citizenship in our active commitment to them. This would move us beyond the definition of our rights and freedoms outlined in the existing Citizenship and Multiculturalism Acts and Charter of Rights and Freedoms in terms that are meaningful in today's globalizing, transnational, info-tech world. These shared values include: individual freedom of thought and expression; appreciation and respect for difference; peaceful coexistence; the rule of law; pursuit of equality; support for human rights; social "safety net" provisions; sustainable economic development; negotiation and compromise; all within a parliamentary democracy. Participatory citizenship would then be based on an expressed commitment to these existing core values, as well as a heightened sense of allegiance to Canada rooted in truly inclusive collective decision-making. As an explicit, consensual, social contract, a Citizenship Charter would simultaneously increase public awareness of our commonality and promote active commit-

ment to the responsibilities of a citizenship rooted in a clearer sense of our *obligations* to each other.

In brief, the more fruitful question is not so much "what *is* 'Canadian'?" but rather "what does it *mean* to be a Canadian?" The answer lies in an expressed commitment and allegiance to a sovereign entity called Canada, firmly founded on shared societal values and enhanced participation in collective decision-making. National *unity* is thus concretely facilitated via a shared participatory citizenship rooted in a joined sense of commonality and collectivity; this common citizenship experience in turn forms the foundation for an emerging trans-cultural national *identity*. Such a national (=civic) identity is neither incompatible with primary ethno-cultural self-definitions — whether primary, segmented or symbolic — nor dependent upon a pre-existing shared national culture. The de-coupling of culture from nation means that ethno-cultural identities need not fully overlap with those associated with nationality or citizenship; instead they simply intersect. This is not to say that a civic identity cannot *become* a statement about a national *cultural* identity: shared values form the very basis of social interaction that in time can translate into a distinctive lifeway. Shared citizenship, however, need neither begin with a common culture nor require it as a final end-product.

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Both unity and identity are contingent upon an *experienced* sense of belonging. How might such grounding in meaningful experience best be achieved? The basic tools required for an *invigorated* citizenship — identity, civic participation, social justice — are in fact already largely in place in existing Multiculturalism programming priorities.

EXPLORING IDENTITY

Official recognition of the inherent value of difference *legitimates* the rights of individuals and collectives to explore their various identities and identifications as well as the ways in which they overlap or intersect with those of others. This is in keeping with Canada's commitment to individual and collective rights and to freedom of choice of expression; it also enhances individual wellbeing and strengthens our social fabric. It would require a transition from a discourse of "tolerance and celebration" to one that articulates a cherishing of diversity rooted in acceptance, understanding and *respect* for difference – however defined. Efforts need also be made to transcend linguistic, cultural, racial and religious differences to focus on a shared civic national identity defined in terms of common citizenship.

ENSURING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Commonality rooted in shared core values requires not only official recognition and articulation but also concrete expression. The issue here is how best to act upon our democratic ideals in a way that is truly reflective of our ethnocultural diversity; the challenge, how best to engage citizens in a way that is truly meaningful to them. The key to ensuring greater civic participation lies in more *inclusive* and *enhanced* involvement in democratic decision-making. This would enable us to fully realize shared values embedded in notions of participatory democracy in a way that is furthermore responsive to an increasingly globalized context.

ACHIEVING SOCIAL JUSTICE

True inclusiveness requires striving for and achieving social justice. Fundamental to any commitment to human rights is the recognition of socially-relevant differences that unfairly favour one individual or group over another; equally important is the development of measures that effectively address enduring subtle and systemic discrimination against relevant minorities. As such, real justice often necessitates compensatory recognition of variations in life circumstances and opportunities based solely on differences of language, culture, ethnicity, race, religion, age, gender, class, dis/ability and sexual orientation. It is precisely in such instrumental recognition of socially ascribed differences that our experience with Multiculturalism will continue to prove itself invaluable. Actually achieving social justice however, requires a transition from the equality discourse inherent in the existing policy to one that focuses on *equity* instead. Apparent individual/collective and symmetry/asymmetry tensions collapse with the recognition that due to inherent differences in social position, opportunity and life circumstances, individuals and groups sometimes need to be accorded differential treatment in order to ensure that the same principle of "fairness" is applied equitably to all. Equality is the principle, equity its expression.

Increased *legitimacy, inclusiveness* and *equity* entail a redefinition of the Canadian demos, understood both as a shared sense of peoplehood and as a forum for civic debate and collective decision-making. It is time to move away from an official categorization into four solitudes – English, French, aboriginal and ethnic – based on a largely essentialist notion of "culturalism" towards the articulation of commonality more firmly rooted in our shared humanity. Only then will a multi-dimensional participatory citizenship within a trans-cultural framework be able to contribute not only to the goals of national unity and identity, but also to an expanded commitment to social equality and freedom of cultural expression beyond that envisioned within the Multiculturalism Act. Only in this way will a newly invigorated trans-cultural citizenship be able to transform a "deficiency model" of difference to an "asset-building" one better geared to a transnational, information driven, global economy. It is in the redefinition of our demos that we will fully realize Multiculturalism's original vision of inclusion and equality, and in the very articulation of a trans-cultural citizenship that Canada can best meet the challenges of an increasingly borderless world.

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