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THÈMES CANADIENS

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REFLECTIONS ON Multiculturalism at Thirty

BY John Biles

Thirty years after Pierre Trudeau rose in the House of Commons to promulgate the world's first official multiculturalism policy, it is time to take stock of where we have been, ascertain where we find ourselves at present, determine where we need to go in the foreseeable future, and then set about the complex business of getting there. The articles in this issue will help with the first three, but the last depends upon us all working together.

Last fall's Durban conference is illustrative of the cross roads at which we find ourselves. There is something admirable about a global community willing to tackle the thorny issues arising from diversity in the full glare of media from around the world. At the same time, it is apparent to most that governments and NGOs are far more comfortable discussing the sins of commission and omission of others than they are discussing their own. How else do we explain the absence of discussion on sexual orientation, reluctance to engage in discussions of caste, slavery or Aboriginal peoples, or the non-response of so many to the anti-Semitism that ran amok at the NGO forum? My short-hand for this phenomenon is *my diversity is okay and yours isn't.*

For thirty years this tension has played itself out in Canada. The concerns of cultural retention and race relations have battled for pre-eminence in federal policy and programming, only occasionally forging a temporary truce and thereby effecting change. This clash has more recently been submerged beneath the cantankerous battle surrounding social cohesion. Cohesion conjures images of a glue that binds the peripheral to the central: the 21st century rendition of the elusive concepts of national unity and Canadian identity which so dominated federal policy at the end of the last century. What does one do when the centre proves to be in a constant state of flux? Globalization and post-modernity have brought researchers, NGOs and governments face-to-face with a complex world where multiple and shifting identities are the norm and relatively simple and bounded identities are as rare as a phoenix or unicorn, and just as real.

The strategic goals of the renewed multiculturalism program – social justice, identity and civic participation – have provided a more flexible means to address a complex reality. They recognize identities as contested and evolving; social justice as contingent upon the right to secure identity(-ies) and full participation as essential to the social, economic, cultural and political aspects of Canadian life. These goals do not presume a bounded unchanging centre, but a space for connections to be forged, nurtured and sustained. In a very tangible sense, the federal multiculturalism policy – and the hundreds of policies which have flowed from it at every level of Canadian society – is designed to bring Canadians together. For thirty years the policy has assisted the Government of Canada to do just that, allowing Canadians to share their stories, myths and symbols. These in turn have fostered foundational values of respect for human rights, individual freedom and equality.

Still, while much work has been done on issues of diversity and a good deal of progress has been made, we must resist resting on our laurels. The challenges for tomorrow are how to continue to effect change and how to do it in a radically changed environment. And our most pressing and urgent task is to ensure that younger hands, hearts and minds be brought in to all three critical sectors (research, policy and NGO) – that their voices be heeded and heard at all levels and that they have an opportunity to learn from their predecessors before retirement sends so many to explore other domains. The passing of the knowledge torch must begin and it must begin now.

Should we be discouraged that thirty years into this policy so much remains undone? I do not believe so. Thirty years ago, no budget speech contained a statement like, "Mr. Speaker … if ignored, intolerance can threaten the fabric of our nation and we must answer it. It can divide our communities and we must stop it. That is why the Government will provide new funding, aimed at fostering respect and promoting our values, values which have allowed us to welcome so many to Canada, so many who have enriched us so much." (Budget Speech 2001)

We have moved a long way. We have so much further to go.

John Biles - Metropolis Project Team, Citizenship and Immigration Canada