THIRTY YEARS LATER:

Reflections on the Evolution and Future Prospects of Multiculturalism

BY Tamara Palmer Seiler

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ON 8 OCTOBER 1971, PRIME MINISTER PIERRE ELLIOTT TRUDEAU MADE A SPEECH TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS IN WHICH HE ANNOUNCED THAT HIS LIBERAL GOVERNMENT HAD INITIATED A CULTURAL POLICY THAT HE DESCRIBED AS "MULTICULTURALISM WITHIN A BILINGUAL FRAMEWORK" SHORTLY THEREAFTER, A NUMBER OF PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS ANNOUNCED SIMILAR POLICIES. SINCE THAT TIME, THESE POLICIES HAVE EVOLVED IN A VARIETY OF WAYS. THEY WERE BOLSTERED IN L982 BY ARTICLE 27 OF THE *CANADIAN CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS*, WHICH STATED THAT THE CHARTER "SHALL BE INTERPRETED IN A MANNER CONSISTENT WITH THE PRESERVATION AND ENHANCEMENT OF THE MULTICULTURAL HERITAGE OF CANADA."



Courtesy Department of Canadian Heritage

In 1984, the "Equality Now" federal parliamentary report, in response to the concerns of "visible minority" groups about discrimination and inequality in Canadian society, offered eighty recommendations for change, including several for affirmative action. And in 1988 the Conservative government's enactment (under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney) of Bill C-93 formally legislated the federal government's commitment to "the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada." Despite this thirty-year history, and Canada's pioneering role in inventing both the term and the policy, multiculturalism continues to arouse controversy.

As a number of commentators have pointed out, this controversy is generated in part by the fact that the term has a number of different, if interrelated meanings, depending on the context in which it is being discussed. Beyond its general meaning as a means of accommodating diversity, it can also be understood in at least four other ways – as an empirical description of a heterogeneous society, as an ideology advocating equity and a lived appreciation of difference, as a specific governmental policy that has been implemented in a variety of quarters with varying degrees of success, and as a political process whereby minority groups negotiate their claims to space, status and power in the social order. This range of meanings has generated debate and misunderstanding, as has the evolution in the way that that the official policy has been inflected since it was announced in 1971.

A product of a particular set of historical dynamics in Canada, the federal policy has evolved from being primarily an embodiment of the aspirations of (largely European) ethnic groups for cultural recognition, to being as well a vehicle for addressing issues of systemic racism and more recently to being a means of arguably downplaying difference and highlighting inclusive citizenship. While some see these different emphases as being mutually compatible, others have felt disconcerted by them. The contemporary debate around multiculturalism grows out of this complex web of meaning and inflections, as well as out of issues connected with globalization that have emerged since the Multicultural Act was passed in 1988.

Since this arguably landmark event, the first such legislative entrenchment of pluralism in the world, multiculturalism in Canada can be seen to have moved in two seemingly opposite directions. On the one hand, Canada has become more and more ethnically and racially diverse. As well, many of the key ideas of multicultural ideology (such as the notion that cultural diversity is a central and valuable part of Canadian life) have gained wide acceptance, embodied in a variety of mainstream institutions, from school systems to law courts. Canada has also become well known internationally as a leader and a model in the area of managing diversity. Moreover, the neo-conservative ideology that has become increasingly pervasive over the past decade has brought with it an emphasis on the globalization of the market place. This emphasis has focused the rhetoric of multiculturalism on the economic value of diversity, which has in a certain way broadened its appeal as Canada's means to achieving a

competitive advantage in the world of global business.

On the other hand, this same neo-conservative ideology has driven a reduction in spending on virtually all of the federal government's social and cultural programs, as well as fostering a no-nonsense mindset unsympathetic to such "politically correct" liberal causes as fostering an appreciation of cultural diversity and a commitment to social justice. Thus even as Canada's international reputation as a pioneer in the area of managing diversity is growing and as its social landscape – particularly in large urban centres – is being transformed by an increasingly diverse population, official multiculturalism is coming under greater attack than ever before, and its profile and budget are shrinking.

Over this thirty-year history, opponents of multiculturalism have not only seen it as a dangerous waste of money, but also as a threat to Canadian unity since it purportedly fosters old-world hatreds and a generally balkanized society. The perennial public discussion about the desirability of diverse immigration has been given new impetus since the dramatic and tragic events of September 11, as has the notion that the consequences of multiculturalism are not only problematic for Canadians, but also downright dangerous. Advocates of multiculturalism on the other hand, when not completely silenced by the force and solemnity of public debate around diversity in the months since September 11, have continued to believe – if not to argue publicly – that the philosophy of multiculturalism still offers the best long-term approach for Canadians for dealing with the challenges and opportunities posed by pluralistic national and world communities.

Perhaps the fear most often expressed with regard to multiculturalism has been that it will contribute to the fragmentation of a Canadian society that is already precariously divided along regional and linguistic lines. One such critique of multiculturalism that has received considerable press in recent years is *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994) by Caribbean-born novelist, Neil Bissoondath. His assertion that critics of multiculturalism have been silenced in Canada is hardly accurate, given both the policy's relatively weak positioning since its inception, and the long history of criticism of the policy – academic, journalistic, and political. However, his argument that multiculturalism tends to separate Canadians from one another, focusing them on their ancestral homelands and their differences, rather than on Canada and their commonalties, struck a resonant chord for many Canadians deeply concerned about the fragmentation of the country in the aftermath of the defeat of the Charlottetown Accord and of the 1995 Quebec Referendum in which the separatist option was defeated by the narrowest of margins.

This uneasiness, combined with the pressures of globalization and of receiving in the past decade the greatest numbers of immigrants in Canadian history, to say nothing of the problems associated with an economic recession in the early 90s (and the economic downturn since September 11) has fostered something of a backlash toward highlighting racial/ethnic/cultural diversity. This feeling has been to some degree both nurtured and expressed through the growth of neo-conservatism, evident in the Reform Party's rise to the status of official opposition. This position has given prominence to the Reform view (now espoused by the Alliance Party) that the multicultural policy should be scrapped in favour of an emphasis on equality of individuals.

Given the social, economic and cultural developments that shaped the 1990s, it is perhaps not surprising that both the short-lived Conservative government of Kim Campbell and the long-standing Liberal government of Jean Chretien reduced the prominence of multiculturalism. For example, in 1993, the federal government eliminated the separate Department of Multiculturalism, making its mandate one of many within the Ministry of Canadian Heritage.

What will be the fate of multiculturalism as we move into the new millennium? Will an ideology born out of the aftermath of the Second World War, with that era's energy and prosperity, its revulsion to racism in all its forms, its determination to inscribe liberal ideals of social justice into every aspect of life, both public and private, and perhaps in Canada in particular, its faith in the vision of the peaceable kingdom, continue to be relevant in an era seemingly defined by different imperatives?

Some would doubtless argue that the policy of multiculturalism has outlived its usefulness; that is, the goals it articulated in 1971 have, for the most part, been achieved. Ethnic/racial/cultural diversity has not only been accepted and extolled officially in Canada, enshrined in the constitution and in legislation, but also unofficially by a large number of Canadians who readily accept the mosaic symbolism and the rhetoric of diversity as definitive of Canadian identity. The negative attitudes of the pre-Second World War era toward the largely European ethnic "other" in Canada – eastern, central and southern Europeans – have virtually disappeared. That Anglo-Canadians once regarded people of, say, Ukrainian, Italian or Polish background as undesirable is a fading page of history, one that often surprises younger Canadians who may themselves be from a mixed ethno-cultural background and whose education has been shaped by a curriculum based on multicultural ideology.

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As well, despite the backlash described above, many Canadians take for granted the growing racial, ethnic and cultural diversity of Canada's population, and are largely supportive of breaking down any barriers that may yet

exist to the full participation of people of all backgrounds in all aspects of Canadian life.

In this milieu, a policy aimed at supporting what some have called "folkloric multiculturalism" (defined by its emphasis on recognizing the cultural contribution of "other" ethnic groups and promoting tolerance of ethnic diversity) seems patronizing and unnecessary. Others point out that the cultural emphasis of the early years of the policy has long been refocused on issues of equity and human rights. They also note that while negative attitudes toward European ethnicity may no longer be prevalent, racist attitudes continue to have a major impact on the lives of visible minorities. This makes programs aimed at eliminating barriers and educating Canadians for living in an increasingly ethnically and racially diverse society not only necessary, but also urgently so. In short, the debate about multiculturalism, both as ideology and as policy, persists into the twenty-first century, although the demographic and political context out of which it emerged has changed.

The perennial nature of this debate can in part be traced to the ambiguities inherent in multiculturalism, both in theory and in practice. Many of these ambiguities are due to the difficulty of reconciling the competing concepts of dualism and pluralism in Canada. Indeed, this basic conflict and power differential between dualism and pluralism has shaped the multicultural policy throughout its existence. As political scientist Yasmeen Abu-Laban puts it,

> "Even when its focus expanded during the 1980s, multiculturalism never challenged state practices that reflected cultural dualism. Thus, for example, the Department of Multiculturalism was patently subordinate, both in funding and stature, to other areas of state activity such as bilingualism. Although allotments vary from year to year, funding for multiculturalism has tended to be between 2 and 8 percent of what is spent on bilingualism. Likewise, the inclusion of multiculturalism in the Charter of Rights was done in the context of also entrenching the status of French and English as official languages, which, some have argued, also entrenched the superordinate status of French- and British-origin groups in the constitution."

Another major cause of ambiguity in the policy, which has in turn fueled criticism, has been the problem of its having to respond to a number of different constituencies. These include not only the "two" founding peoples – British and French – and Native peoples who of course also rightly claim the status of founding peoples, but also new immigrant groups, primarily visible minorities, as well as long established groups, who are themselves diverse in terms of such variables as time of arrival in Canada, generation, region of settlement and class. Thus it is difficult for one policy (or one symbolic order) to represent Canada's diversity, especially when the vision espoused by the "founding" groups is based on claims to special status, while the ideology of multiculturalism is based on equality.

Another closely related ambiguity within the discourse of multiculturalism that has fueled debate and sowed confusion centers around the perhaps inescapable dilemma inherent in developing a policy that can at once foster two arguably incompatible processes: the championing of difference on the one hand, and of equality of opportunity and treatment for all groups and individuals on the other. Can a discourse of 'nation' successfully call official attention to ethno-cultural difference while at the same time demanding it be ignored? Like the idea captured in the phrase "unity in diversity," that of extolling both diversity and equality requires an appreciation of paradox that may be in shorter and shorter supply in a globalized world driven by the no-nonsense imperatives of neo-conservatism and a war on terrorism.

Clearly, the notion of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework is not a neat conceptual construct. Some argue that it is simply an unworkable muddle. Multiculturalism reflects a compromise vision of the Canadian social contract, one that when combined with an appropriate and yet-to-be worked-out acknowledgment of the place of Aboriginal peoples arguably embodies the historical complexity of Canada as well as its social evolution since the Second World War. Multiculturalism as both ideology and policy is to some considerable extent a Canadian invention, one for which Canada has been commended by the United Nations, and other international bodies, who see it as highly useful contribution to an increasingly interdependent world community, and who regard Canada's experience with it as exemplary, if not always perfect.

So, even though official multiculturalism has been under attack in Canada, to some degree since its inception and particularly in recent years, it is nevertheless regarded, both from within and from without, as an enlightened, even necessary approach to managing cultural diversity: a challenge which many societies have failed miserably. Sociologists Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliott speak for many when they argue that:

> "Multiculturalism, in short, remains the policy of necessity if not of choice for a changing and diverse Canada. As policy or practice, it symbolizes an innovative if imperfect social experiment for managing diversity ... Canada cannot afford not to embrace multiculturalism in its relentless search for political unity, social coherence, economic prosperity, and cultural enrichment."

If this analysis is relatively accurate, the current downgrading of multiculturalism will likely be just another phase in the policy's history. However, even if the policy itself is jettisoned, it seems unlikely that the ideology of multiculturalism will disappear, or even be seriously challenged. This seems true even in the wake of September 11, given the symbolic power among Canadians of the notion that Canada is a diverse society, a cultural mosaic, and perhaps most important of all, given the remarkable increase since the 1960's in the ethnic and racial diversity of Canadians and the increasingly global nature of human interaction.

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