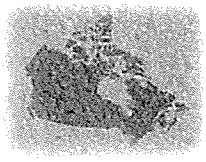
The Teaching of Ethnic Diversity and the French Fact in Canada



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It is sometimes said that Canada is a new country with a limited history and abundant geography. I take great exception to such an assertion. Canada is not a new country. In fact, in terms of human habitation it is probably as old as Europe. Nor do we have but a short history – unless, of course, by that we mean ignorance of our history. Canadian history goes back to the preliterate era and we ignore this long historical development from those early times at our intellectual peril. I find it difficult to tolerate politicians and educators who think Canada began in 1867 with Confederation. One of the reasons we may not appreciate the French fact and our cultural diversity as we might is because of this historically limited vision.

It is evident that we teach what we understand, and also by default what we fail to comprehend. Increasingly, we are being drawn into the American concept of a new world, of nation-building and of eventual continental homogeneity. But all our history cries out against this concept. Canada has always been on its own unique evolutionary social, cultural and political track. What is important to remember is that, unlike the American republic born in revolution, we were conceived in an evolutionary process which has not yet completed its course. We are not now what we will be a few decades hence. I make these preliminary remarks to indicate that the French fact and our multicultural society a generation from now will not be precisely what they are today in their relationship.



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Canada has always been a multicultural and multilingual region of the North American continent. For countless centuries aboriginal peoples belonging to diverse cultural modes and at least eleven linguistic families interacted with each other and their environments economically, culturally and politically. They established vast communication and trade networks through water routes, forest trails and prairie trails. The arrival of European intruders did not necessitate the re-invention of trade and communication systems. They merely inserted themselves into the existing pattern of communications, exchange and alliances. The major intersections of these water, forest and prairie routes became the site of future towns and cities.

The French colony (New France) developed into a dualistic experiment between a small St. Lawrence valley and Acadian shoreline European settlement and a vast continental Native hinterland where the various Native nations retained their ancestral territories, were independent and self-governing, and enjoyed complete freedom of movement, trade and control over their resources. All this under the umbrella of French sovereignty proclaimed to counter the claims of European rivals. An initial policy of cultural assimilation of aboriginal peoples was

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quickly abandoned as the French traders, missionaries and military officers learned various Amerindian languages. Already, colonial Canada was multicultural and some of its key citizens were bilingual. We must never ignore the fact that New France was built on an aboriginal foundation. New France is my area of specialization, so I could go on at some length about Canada as a French colony. Suffice it to say that the French legacy, like the aboriginal foundations, to our national character is too often ignored in our historical and cultural studies and enterprises.



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I often hear it said that Canada was a British colony and that the basis of our European culture – politics, commerce, folkways, education, etc. – is British, or some admixture of English, Scots and Irish. But this British colonial period was founded on the existing French colonies of Acadia and Canada. Much of its early British population was composed of involuntary migration – political refugees of the American revolution and economic refugees of the Scottish enclosures and Irish famines. The coming of the British did not replace the existing Native or French populations. They only added to them and thereby complicated further the intercultural relations of the colony.

The British conquest of Canada in 1759-60 did not obliterate the Amerindian and French cultures and institutions. A French Catholic colony in the British Empire posed many immediate problems, so that conquest was in some respects traumatic not only for the conquered but also for the victors. I believe that in a historical sense there was more immediate continuity than change. Britain like France was an Ancien Régime society – monarchy, state church, aristocratic values, mercantilist economy – and Canada under British rule now escaped the revolutionary assaults on traditional society set loose by the Philosophes, the American Revolution and the French Revolution. There were certainly those who entertained the dream of anglicising and Anglicanizing the European fragments, but wiser administrators adopted conciliatory measures. I cite the Royal Proclamation of 1763, designed to protect Native territorial rights, while providing for eventual European settlement in the hinterland characterized as "Indian hunting grounds", a nod in favour of the continuation of the earlier French policies regarding Native peoples. The Quebec Act of 1774 also provided for the continued use of the French language, the religious and cultural rights of the Catholic church, the traditional French civil code and the landholding system.

Of course, democratic ideals eventually emerged in Britain and the colonies. What may be instructive in the context of this discussion, is that group relations became acrimonious when ethnic diversity, cultural distinctions and linguistic rights were overridden. One thinks of the struggle for responsible government in Lower Canada in the 1840s, for bilingualism in the 1850s, and separate schools in Canada West in the 1860s.

Canada is a country of minorities in both the numerical and sociological meaning of the term "minority." The early French settlers were a minority on the Amerindian continent, and were outnumbered one to twenty by the English colonies. The United Empire Loyalists were a displaced minority too, soon to be joined by other minorities – Highland Scots, dispossessed Irish, Blacks of the Underground Railroad, Mennonites, etc. We were populated, in other words, as I sometimes jokingly remind students, by defeated and uprooted peoples, the "born losers" both militarily and economically – French Canadians, United Empire Loyalists, etc. But acting together these "losers" built an alternative North American society, different from the American republic yet not altogether dissimilar.

I believe that with this kind of view of our national evolution we may tend to be more tolerant of newcomers, more open hearted and open-minded towards the unfortunate who seek refuge and a new start in life, more willing to contemplate cultural compromises as we recall the changes the arrival of our own immediate ancestors provoked.

Since Confederation, minorities have been concerned about language and group survival. Restriction of French and Catholic schooling in New Brunswick in 1869, in Manitoba in the 1890s, and in Ontario in 1912-13, for example, did not improve intergroup relations. The failure of Manitoba to develop as a second predominantly francophone province, bilingual and bicultural as some hoped in 1870, increased Quebec's isolation within a predominantly anglophone Canada. Nationalistic feelings in Quebec were further stimulated by the economic domination of an internal anglophone minority, a sometimes insensitive federal intrusion in socio-cultural affairs, a crisis in the maintenance of linguistic distinctiveness, and immigration that continues to swell the ranks of the non-francophone community.

Teaching about the French fact and ethnic diversity in Canada must take into account that the forces of nationalism are growing, not retreating, in our world in spite of, or because of, the fact we are involved with globalization. Our nationalism is sometimes segmented as certain communities, such as the Québecois and the Dene, define the boundaries of their "nation" differently and co-exist within the nation-state. Not all Canadians agree that loyalty to the nation-state must be accorded priority; some believe priority must be given to the region or to an ethnolinguistic group within the larger political unit. Therefore, it should not surprise us that this understanding of "community" is held by two primary buildings blocs of our country – the aboriginal peoples and the Québecois.

It is important that we realize that we are living in a period of influential immigration and accelerated social change. Canadians society is evolving – is changing – remarkably every decade since the 1980s. We are now more urban, industrial and technologically-oriented than a generation ago. Our educational programmes and systems have not been able to keep pace with these mutations. That is one reason why our educational systems are under such great stress and scrutiny. So, when we speak of teaching about ethnic diversity and the French fact, we need to be clear whether we are concerned with the Canada of the past as it has evolved over time, or about the present state of flux. In this particular session, we are concerned with the French fact, but we also need to remember that the British fact in our history is under increasing review also. Canada as a national society is in a formative stage; our national identity is not formed; we are in an accelerated period of social construction. Both the British fact and the French fact, so important in our history as colonial foundations and "founding peoples", are now numerical minorities in the Canadian family. If the present trends continue with low birth rates, they will become increasingly minorities. Furthermore, we have yet to see the impact of the new communications technology on language and identity.

Multiculturalism does not mean that individuals of a particular ethnic ancestry or heritage identify totally with such a group. Indeed, segmented identities exist at the individual and sometimes group level as people identify at the familial and social level with a particular ethno-cultural group and at the occupational, economic and political level with a regional dominant group. Incidentally, the concept of "visual minority" is a situational one, not a cultural one; when I am in India or Taiwan I belong to a visual minority! All the over-arching economic, cultural and social activities that bring people into contact with each other, not to mention inter-marriage, tend to dilute differences, promote cultural cross-fertilization and stimulate the emergence of new perspectives. Isolation – territorial and personal – promotes undifferentiated perpetuation. The relatively high rate of

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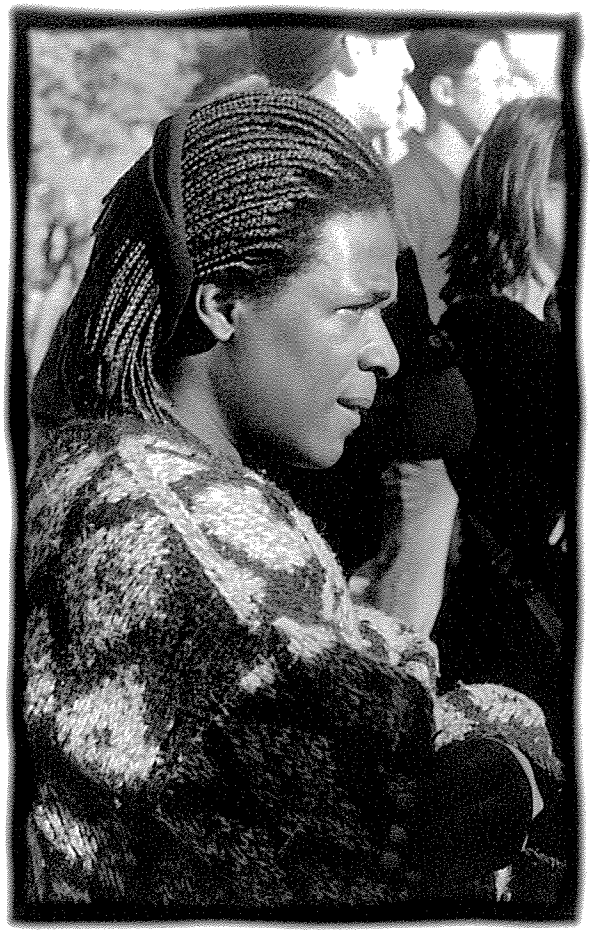

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French language retention in New Brunswick may be attributed to the isolation and insulation of many Acadian communities.

There remains a good deal of mystery around what is meant by the French fact. Are we thinking in historical terms, as I have been up to this point, about the French presence and role in the history of this part of northern hemisphere since about 1600? Or are we thinking demographically of the number of francophones throughout Canada, their growing proportional strength in the province of Quebec, where only the Pontiac remains as a predominantly anglophone rural community, but conversely the recent immigrants in the Montreal area are increasing the anglophone ranks once more? Besides, let us not forget that youth everywhere are the most bilingual. Are we thinking of political power – the fixed number of Quebec's House of Commons seats, the decline of anglophone representation in the National Assembly and Quebec cabinet, etc.? And what about economic power? Has the francophone presence in the federal public service really increased significantly as public opinion seems to believe? Has bilingualism policy helped and have francophones been able to retain second rank in the economic elite of this country?

Whatever the statistics say, we must remember that language of work and home language are more significant statistically than mother tongue. The number of francophones and of French immersion classes in Alberta have increased significantly in the last decade, but has this been reflected in any provincial programmes, provincial public acceptance of bilingualism, or public understanding of the French fact? If we look at the situation in the nation's capital, we must ask ourselves why should there be a "problem" having a Montfort as a French teaching hospital or the new super-city declared officially bilingual. The answers you can provide to all such questions are good indicators of the limited degree to which there have been attitudinal changes.

The argument has been made that unity is best promoted through the recognition of diversity under the constitution. Such a proposition recognizes, of course, that integration of diverse groups does not necessarily entail assimilation. I have touched on four aspects of this question and each is now recognized constitutionally. Historically, we have come through four phases of intercultural relations: the aboriginal period; the French colonial period with interaction between Natives and newcomers; the British colonial period with French-English relations paramount and relations with aboriginal peoples still important; the multiethnic period with all the complexities of group interaction; the individualistic response in this many-faceted mosaic. Constitutionally, the Native situation is recognized through guarantees of aboriginal rights; the colonial legacy through the enshrining of official bilingualism; the immigration experience through the promotion of multiculturalism; the individualistic response to this complex societal environment by the protection of individual rights in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The American historian, Arthur Schlesinger, described Canada as a conservative counter-revolutionary society lacking a strong national myth and lacking a unifying national identity. To my mind, this is what is especially attractive about Canada – this absence of homogenizing uniformity, of conformist indoctrination, of a singular identity, of a chauvinistic mythology. ■