The Muddle of Multiculturalism
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The French president, the German chancellor, and the British prime minister have expressed widely publicized doubts about multiculturalism. Disparaging multiculturalism is not new and some Canadians, especially Quebecers, find fault with it. PQ MNA and former cabinet minister Louise Beaudoin castigates it as “not a Quebec value” and Gérard Bouchard, co-chair of Quebec’s commission on “reasonable accommodation,” rejects it as a “non-starter” in his province. Multiculturalism, according to acclaimed novelist Neil Bissoondath, encourages the isolation and stereotyping of cultural groups while sociologist Reginald Bibby decries it as “mosaic madness.”

Some excoriate multiculturalism for allegedly fostering tribalism; others laud it as societal cement. Pointing proudly to Canada as the first country to adopt a multicultural policy in 1971, multiculturalism’s boosters attribute to it the country’s low level of ethnic strife and its high standing in the world. In this view, the peaceable Canadian kingdom is a trailblazer in managing cultural diversity, a model for others. Following Canada’s lead, other states including Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Australia, and New Zealand (France is a notable exception) have adopted policies that accommodate cultural differences.

Originally understood as referring to the celebration of diverse heritages, multiculturalism now is more likely associated with issues of equity and representation. Measures of the success of multicultural policy are the integration and prosperity of immigrants. Comparatively, immigrants feel accepted and attached to Canada; 84 percent become citizens. In Britain, only 50 percent do, in the United States, 40 percent. The most eager to acquire Canadian citizenship are Africans and Asians, the least keen are Americans. If the past is a guide, recent hand-wringing about the yawning gap between the incomes of immigrants and native-born Canadians may be unwarranted. The earnings and educational attainment levels of second generation Canadians of families that arrived before 1981 exceed those of children of the same age of Canadian-born parents. Whether this pattern has persisted for post-1981 immigrant families, most of whom are visible minorities, is an open question. Success will vary among groups – the Chinese will likely do better than the Latin Americans and the Africans.

Befuddlement respecting multiculturalism is rooted in different uses of the term. It has become a cipher, a coded symbol, often conveyed and received as a subliminal message. Indisputably, western states are increasingly polyethnic and multiracial. Within this decade, visible minorities will become the majority in Toronto and Vancouver. Multiculturalism is also a resource; prime ministers on trade missions to Asia, for example, bring an entourage of Asian Canadian business leaders to grease the wheels of commerce. Now protected by the constitution, multicultural communities may use the equality, fundamental freedoms, and multicultural sections of the Charter of Rights to advance their status.

Multiculturalism thus takes on a different hue in Quebec than in English Canada. The Québécois want immigrants not only to speak French but also to acculturate to Quebec’s historical fabric – its distinctive literary, cultural, and philosophic traditions. Quebec is unapologetic about wishing to integrate and assimilate its minorities and the Québécois call this approach “interculturalism.”

English Canadians in contrast have repressed their society’s British roots and their historic identity as a British people. Where Quebec schools highlight Quebec’s pre- and post-Confederation history, English Canada’s schools studiously avoid British history and the story of English Canadians as a British people. English Canadians, once sentimentally and emotionally attached to the British Empire, longed for Canadian equality as a self-governing dominion, neither a ward nor a subordinate, within the Empire. But now, more Canadians self-identify as being of French than of British ethnic origins, an indication that Canadians of British ethnic origins have buried their ethnic roots. Since 1991, respondents to the census can and many do identify their ethnicity as “Canadian.” Many Canadians of British ethnic origins prefer to think of themselves as internationalist cosmopolites. Five decades ago, they abandoned the Union Jack on the Canadian flag and three decades ago, they jettisoned the very title of their constitution, the British North America Act.
Jason Kenney's Reform Party in the 1990s opposed government-sponsored multicultural programs and campaigned for dramatically reduced immigration levels. The Reformers lambasted multiculturalism and, like John Diefenbaker's Conservatives, rejected the idea of a “hyphenated” Canadian identity. Now, as Minister for Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, Kenney boasts of record immigration levels and assiduously courts ethnic fraternal organizations and their media. He will eat perogies for breakfast, curry for lunch, and won tons for dinner before he will be seen indulging in Yorkshire pudding or Welsh rarebit. Last month at a Filipino-sponsored affair in Brampton, Kenney, cloaked in a robe and crowned on a throne, had a sash festooned across his chest proclaiming him the “King of Multiculturalism.” In photos widely circulated by his office, original Reformer Stephen Harper appears in a Jewish yarmulke and a white Sikh head-covering but not in tartan, kilt, or dancing an Irish jig. An evangelical Christian, we have seen him at mosques, temples, and synagogues, but not at church.

The Conservatives' multicultural forays are obviously not part of the “hidden agenda” of which the Liberals warned.

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