
Re-thinking Canada for the 21st Century

by Senator Donald H. Oliver

This article argues that to be truly Canadian in the 21st century means we must find within ourselves a new tolerance. We must fight a latent desire or need to be racist. Federal politicians who have responsibility for immigration and multicultural policy must ask how can we lead a physically diverse collectivity of Canadians from a mutual recognition of a shared relationship to something called "a nation".

For Canada to survive as a united country, radical surgery is required in two major public policy areas – immigration and multiculturalism. There must also be a massive re-thinking of who we are and what we have become.

Canadians must find the courage to re-evaluate the very notion of what it means to be Canadian, the very fabric of our identity – our symbols, our values, our legacy. We must abandon the established traditions of white, anglo-franco dominant culture. We must accept an identity that includes "difference" – an identity that is fluid, changing, migrating and that reflects the lives of all Canadians, and not just of a white majority.

Migrancy is a fact of life for Canadians. We move for jobs, for better schools, for better communities. Many of our children move between two or more homes. Canada is a country settled by immigrants, first from a predominantly European origin, then from all corners of the globe. Each one of us comes from a tradition of courage and faith and a common future. Our stories tell the stories of Canada. Some are over 100 years old, and others a day.

One problem is that we are reluctant to let go of our European British/French heritage. This tenacious at-

tachment to European traditions is manifested in our history of immigration policy.

In the 1930s, non British immigrants, including Jews fleeing Nazi Germany were denied entry on the grounds



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their admittance would alter the essentially "British character" of the country. This sentiment was endorsed by Prime Minister Mackenzie King who said: "We must always remember that Canada is a white man's country". After the war came change in Canada's immigration policies and with that change, a new generation of immigrants. Canada continues to change toward a population that is multi-ethnic and migratory.

Statistics Canada reports that Canada was home to some 3.2 million visible minorities in 1996. One in three of these visible minorities were born in Canada. Similarly, 18.3 million people (64%) reported one ethnic origin, while 10.2 million (36%) represented more than one. These numbers are growing. A recent poll claimed that visible minorities would become the majority in metropolitan Toronto shortly after the millennium.

But change has not been easy. In fact, EKOS Research conducted a poll in 1993/94 for the federal government. Its findings, as reported in the *Globe and Mail*, were that "four in ten Canadians believe there are too many members of visible minorities in Canada, singling out Arabs, Blacks and Asians for discrimination. Toronto, which at the time had an immigration population of 38 percent, was found to be the most intolerant. Indeed, 67 percent said there were too many immigrants, up 21 percent from a poll conducted just two years prior.

The city's visible minorities are growing so quickly that unless the problems they face are addressed, tensions with the white population is likely to increase. Although the city currently does much to help its diverse population, more must be done to meet the special needs of the non-white population, which will become the majority in about 18 months. The study, titled *Together We Are One*, predicts that visible minorities will make up 54 percent of Toronto's population by 2000. They now account for 48 percent.

Is Canada ready for the reality of a multiracial, non-white-controlled society? If we do not come to grips with this issue will we see massive social unrest in our major Canadian cities.

Some members of Toronto City Council say the changing face of the city will cause resentment and anger among some people. It is a shock for some people, especially the older generation, as they look around and no longer see themselves. At the same time, immigrants face poverty, low education and unemployment. If this situation as well as incidents of hate activity, discriminatory

practices and prejudicial attitudes that plague our city are not addressed, it can only lead to a growing sense of frustration. Although non-whites are nearing majority status, they are under-represented in positions of influence and on issues and policies that affect their lives. The Report says: "There is not an area of public policy or public service that does not have a bearing on the municipality's growing diversity."

The immigrant, particularly the visible minority immigrant, has been a constant victim of racism in Canada. According to some, immigrants are disliked for their excessive enjoyment; their strange exotic customs, their large families, their laziness, their promiscuity. We accuse them of loafing around, drinking beer and smoking drugs, stealing our women, and corrupting our youth. But, paradoxically, in our racist discourse, immigrants are equally hated for their "unnatural" capacity for hard work, or their apparent willingness to "work for nothing" or for only "employing each other" and thus stealing Canadian jobs.

Thus the successful visible minority immigrant and the lazy immigrant are rendered equivalent. The principles of our immigration policy are clearly defective. Part of racism against visible minorities reflects a personal deficiency or weakness in individual Canadians, but there is a larger, over-arching public policy problem – multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism in Canada is a public policy designed to reconcile unity and diversity. It has been criticized as being ideological, paternalistic and counter productive. Critics such as Reginald Bibby, Augie Ferlas and Peter Li argue that it masks and perpetuates structural inequalities, that it marginalizes so-called "ethnics" as categories while giving token acknowledgement to the contribution of minorities to the "mainstream", and that, by emphasizing differences that divide, it undermines the development of collective identification and social solidarity that it intends to cultivate.

Multiculturalism is predicated on "equality" and "diversity" which presumes that the ethno-cultural identities constituting the Mosaic are discrete elements with reconstituted and apparent interests that can and should be maintained and equalized by state intervention. Where some multicultural customs apparently conflict with Canadian laws and customs, it provides food for the likes of the Heritage Front and Ernst Zundel.

Canadians have been reluctant to critically examine multicultural policy. It encodes white anglophones and francophones as the founding peoples of Canada with a polite nod given to native Canadians. Others are left to make up Canada's multi-ethnic character. I feel these principles need urgent examination because, in effect,

white English and French are real Canadians and as Walcott wrote:

Multicultural policy textually inscribes those who are not French or English as Canadians, and yet at the same time, it works to textually render a continued understanding of those people as from elsewhere and thus as tangential to the nation state.¹

We cannot have a united Canada in 2000 with two classes of Canadians.

But in Canada and the US, as in all countries whose political systems are based on the rule of law, serious public policy problems have arisen from the culturally relativistic elements within multiculturalist doctrine. Laws have the function of regulating human behaviour within a society but they also represent a codification of cultural values. What does it mean for a country to proclaim itself to be "multicultural" when the mere existence of certain laws implicitly sanctifies one cultural paradigm and rejects all others?

In this vein, the most obvious examples are those laws that criminalize victimless and consensual acts. In some or all parts of North America, for instance, it is illegal to

perform physician-assisted suicide, to use marihuana, to practice polygamy, to perform sex with a consenting but underage partner, and to solicit for prostitution. The culturally relativist "presumption" that the value system that animates these proscriptions is no better and no worse than alternative systems is not a useful idea in society where laws are universally applied to call citizens.²

Under a multicultural political system, Charles Taylor has written: "The politics of difference often redefines non-discrimination as requiring that we make differences between groups the basis of differential treatment." While it may be possible to set up an odd sort of liberal political system in which different laws apply to different citizens, such a system would rebel powerfully against the democratic ideal that most of us imagine.

Notes

1. Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who?: Writing Black Canada* Toronto, Insomniac Press, 1997.
2. Johnathan Kay, "Explaining the Modern Backlash Against Multiculturalism, *Policy Options*, May 1998 19:30.