Multiculturalism in Canada: Evolution, Effectiveness and Challenges

Our history, a complex and imperfect process of accommodation — between Indigenous peoples and French and then British settlers (English, Scottish and Irish), subsequently between French and British Canadians as reflected in the Quebec Act of 1774 and the British North America Act of 1867 — made Canada more multinational in character than a traditional nation state.

While accommodation has been more or less meaningful, as the various English vs. French ‘Canada crises’ played out, and the original more cooperative relationship with Indigenous peoples was replaced by efforts at assimilation, the understanding that one group or culture could never completely dominate endured. Hence this initial diversity, and the ongoing creative tension between groups created a culture of accommodation and compromise, central and distinct to Canada’s ability to absorb and integrate the many newcomers who have chosen to settle here.

Early language on integration, as opposed to assimilation, reflected this approach to recognizing difference as a means to foster participation and set the stage for multiculturalism.

Objectives and evolution

The Canadian approach to multiculturalism, one based on recognition as a means to facilitate integration, was formally enunciated in the Multiculturalism Policy of 1971, under a Liberal government, subsequently codified through the 1988 Multiculturalism Act under a Conservative government.

The policy responded to the Bi and Bi ‘Other Groups’ chapter (the 1960s Royal Commission on bilingualism and biculturalism) and the related political pressures for recognition by non-French and non-British ethnic groups. While Ukrainian Canadian and other groups, were particularly influential given their belief that they had played a comparable role in settling the West to that played by French and British settlers in Eastern Canada, this recognition also resonated with ethnic groups across the country.

The policy emerged largely in the context of “white” ethnic groups and Christians, thus presenting fewer potential accommodation issues as the visible minority population was then very small, and religious minorities, save Canadian Jews, were also small.

The main objectives of both the Policy and the Act were to facilitate integration through:

- Retaining and fostering of identity: As indicated in the special immigration settlement section in the Canada Year Book 1959 and the Bi and Bi Report, integration, not assimilation, was favoured as the best approach to encouraging participation. Assistance, whether in terms of
funding for ‘food and folklore’ events, ‘heritage’ languages for newcomer children, or political recognition through messages or events (e.g., Black History Month, Asian Heritage Month) were some of the means used to recognize their contribution.

**Overcoming barriers to participation:** For integration to be meaningful, barriers, whether economic, social, cultural or political, needed to be reduced, if not eliminated, to ensure meaningful equality of opportunity. Ideally, outcomes for all groups would be comparable, whether with respect to employment and income, education, representation in government and private institutions and the like.

**Promoting exchanges:** Multiculturalism is not about remaining in silos or ethnic enclaves. Exchanges and sharing between individuals and communities is encouraged as part of recognizing identities and encouraging participation.

**Language acquisition:** Minority groups are encouraged to learn at least one official language.

In addition, the Act includes the requirement to table before Parliament an annual report of government efforts to promote and implement multiculturalism.

The Multiculturalism Policy and Act were more aspirational than prescriptive. As a result, governments and policy makers were relatively free to adjust the focus and emphasis as appropriate to the times and priorities. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Employment Equity Act provide the more prescriptive framework for implementation of the Policy and Act.

The actual Multiculturalism Program, a mix of policy work, a small amount of Grant and Contribution project funding and communications mirrored these developments. Table 1 highlights this evolution through a number of different aspects, with an overall change in emphasis towards greater civic integration following the attacks of 9/11 in 2001.
### Table 1: Evolution of Canadian Multiculturalism

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**Ethnicity Multiculturalism:** The initial focus was on recognition of the cultural contributions the various ethnic groups made to Canada through celebrating cultural differences and diversity. While there was a strong group or community emphasis, both in terms of activities and funding (e.g., heritage language programs), the policy focus was more on how individuals could reduce prejudice and discrimination through greater cultural sensitivity. The metaphor of the “cultural mosaic,” often used in contrast with the American metaphor of the “melting pot,” was central to recognition.

**Equity Multiculturalism:** In the 1980s, following the Charter, the emphasis shifted to managing diversity through addressing structural issues within government and society. Individual adjustment was replaced with more specific obligations to accommodate diversity as a means to address systemic discrimination, along with the Employment Equity Act that applied to the federal government and federally-regulated industries, with most provinces having comparable legislation or policies. The metaphor shifted towards ensuring a “level playing field” for all, no matter what their origin.

**Civic Multiculturalism:** While equity remained a key element of multiculturalism, the focus broadened to include the broader concepts of engagement and society building, or shared citizenship. Increasing participation of minority groups in all aspects of Canadian society was to reduce actual or potential exclusion. The previous emphasis on employment equity and removing economic barriers was broadened to a more general inclusivity, with the metaphor shifting in turn to “belonging.”
Integrative Multiculturalism: Following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, and resulting concerns regarding integration and security, the emphasis shifted to inclusive citizenship, linked to Canadian identity, as a means to strengthen integration and thus reduce threats of radicalization and extremism. While rights had always been part of multiculturalism, responsibilities were added to reinforce integration. To address the “clash of cultures/civilization” discourse and ongoing unequal access in terms of power and influence, greater dialogue to foster better mutual understanding was promoted. The metaphor of that period became “harmony/jazz,” whereby harmony represented Canada’s common legal and constitutional framework (responsibilities) and jazz the ad hoc improvised addressing accommodation requests (rights).

Cohesion multiculturalism: The scepticism of the Harper government regarding multiculturalism and their preference for the term pluralism led them to significantly redefine multiculturalism around Canadian values as a means to improve social cohesion and integration. Responsibilities were more emphasized compared to rights. Faith and culture clashes, as reflected in both the nature and number of accommodation requests and concerns over radicalized Canadians, were to be addressed through emphasis on shared values that were anchored in Canadian history, particularly British influences, as seen in the revised Discover Canada citizenship guide and the overt celebrations of the War of 1812. The metaphor became “conforming” to the host society.

Inclusion multiculturalism: The 2015 election brought the introduction of a government-wide diversity and inclusion agenda that aimed at mainstreaming multiculturalism. Inclusive citizenship was best exemplified by the compositions of the new Cabinet and the acceptance of the niqab at citizenship ceremonies but also extended to appointment processes that aimed at increasing the diversity of political appointments. Diversity was portrayed as a Canadian strength. Barriers were to be overcome through shared more universalist values. The metaphor consequently became “embracing” diversity and multiculturalism, rather than merely accepting or tolerating.

Accomplishments

On the whole, the data suggests that Canada has been largely successful at building an inclusive, multicultural society that encourages participation and integration through immigration, settlement, citizenship and multiculturalism policies and programs. Analysis of data from the 2011 National Household Survey (unlikely to change significantly in the 2016 Census) confirms this success, but not without raising some issues and risks.

Greater and more varied diversity: Diversity within Canada continues to evolve and is becoming more complex and varied, with over 250 ethnicities, an ever-larger visible minority population and increased religious diversity. Statistical groups of visible minorities and ethnic origins, while useful for broad comparisons, understate the degree of diversity within these groups, whether in terms of religion, country of origin, time of immigration to Canada, or individual values and perspectives.

Quebec’s interculturalism and Canada’s multiculturalism share more commonalities than differences, given that they both aim at civic integration, with interculturalism specifying integration into Quebec francophone culture.
Economic differences persist: Economic differences between visible minorities and those of Canadian or European origin persist, even if participation rates for visible minorities are stronger. This is also the case for most second-generation immigrants who have been schooled in Canada. Many university-educated second-generation visible minorities aged 25 to 34 are doing as well or better than non-visible minorities.

Strong educational performance: Education outcomes for most visible minority groups are significantly stronger than for non-visible minority groups in terms of university education. In most groups, there is no major difference between levels of education for men and women. Canadian provinces continue to do a good job of integrating young new Canadians in primary and secondary schools.

Discrimination remains an issue: Police-reported hate crime statistics have remained largely flat over the past eight years. Hate crimes are generally more common in provinces with greater numbers of visible minorities and religious minorities. GSS 2013 data shows that visible minorities are slightly less likely to view police as approachable or trustworthy. These statistics probably underestimate the number of hate crimes occurring, and do not account for other examples of religious and racial intolerance and discrimination. Ongoing prejudice and discrimination account in part for the persistence of difference in economic outcomes for visible minority groups as shown by blind resumé tests.

Improved representation in public services: Representation of visible minorities in the public institutions that Canadians interact with the most — healthcare, social services and higher education — is close to being representative of the population in the larger provinces. Visible minorities and non-visible minorities are more often than not served by a diverse mix. While many visible minorities in these sectors are in more junior positions, a number of communities have strong representation in more highly-paid occupations. Similarly, core public service representation is reasonably strong. Employment of visible minorities in the federal government is roughly in line with (a conservative) workforce availability, with the exception of some federal departments and agencies (e.g., Canadian Forces, RCMP). Governments of the larger provinces, with the exception of Quebec, are also reasonably representative.

Political representation: Representation of visible minorities at the federal level improved dramatically in the 2015 election: 13.9 percent compared to the 15 percent who are also citizens, up from 9.4 percent in 2011. Women continue to be severely under-represented (26 percent of all federal MPs, but among visible minority MPs, 32 percent are women). Most provinces have moderate under-representation.

Canada has no anti-immigration party and all parties are competing for the ethnic vote (some have argued, given demographics, that it is now impossible to win a majority government without attracting immigrant and visible minority voters).

Ongoing challenges
As diversity continues to increase in more places, debates and discussion over reasonable accommodation, particularly with respect to religious practises will continue to be the main focus of public and media attention. How well Canada manages these discussions, how well the
informal and formal processes work, and the degree to which consensus is achieved or not is critical to the ongoing success of Canadian integration.

As Canada continues to welcome some 300,000 immigrants per year, how well and how quickly they become part of the workforce and how well they succeed remains an issue. While there will likely always be a lag with respect to most first generation immigrants, the outcomes of the second generation, born and educated in Canada, is critical. While those with university education are generally doing well, those without are doing more poorly than “old stock” Canadians.

While the overall number of reported hate crimes is small, these numbers understate the degree of discrimination and prejudice as polling data regarding religious “headgear” attests. More race-based data collection is required to identify areas of systemic racism or bias (as Ontario has recently initiated). Ongoing attention is required to reduce implicit and explicit bias in hiring practices.

Historically, close to 86 percent of immigrants have become citizens. Policy changes and dramatically higher processing fees have resulted in a drop from about 200,000 annual applications to about half that number, meaning fewer new Canadian voters, risking political exclusion, weaker social cohesion and a breakdown in the Canadian immigrant-to-citizen model.

Political and public discourse paints a varied picture. While there is no overt anti-immigrant party, the federal conservatives have flirted with identity politics as seen in the 2015 election (e.g., niqab, barbaric cultural practices) and subsequently (e.g., some of the 2017 leadership candidates, approach to M-103). The Liberal government, in turn, has sometimes taken an overly pollyannish attitude to the concerns of some Canadians regarding the pace of change, the effectiveness of enforcement, and concerns regarding values.

As Canada’s 150th draws to a close, how well we handle these and related issues remain critical to our future.