Policy Arrogance or Innocent Bias: Resetting Citizenship and Multiculturalism by Andrew Griffith (review)

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This slim but informative book sheds light on the understudied subject of the relations between political masters and their civil servants. Penned by a thoughtful former public servant who toiled on multicultural issues for three decades in the Departments of Canadian Heritage and more recently Citizenship and Immigration, Andrew Griffith offers a cautionary tale: when governments change, public servants must be prepared to jettison long held assumptions regarding operational as well as policy issues. Griffith witnessed the events associated with the shifting of responsibility for multiculturalism from one department to another. Public administration guru Gilles Paquet encouraged Griffith to write the book and Griffith delivers a trenchant case study in policy change management as a participant-observer.

Some smartly titled chapters – “Which Ideology Will that Be?” “Would That Be Evidence Or Anecdote?” and “So What Kind of ‘Yes Minister’ Will That Be?” – communicate competing worldviews. Elected in 2006, the Conservatives have been less sanguine than most civil servants about government as a positive force. Each side is convinced of its rectitude. One has a mandate to deliver on its platform promises and seeks to fulfil them; the other offers large-scale survey evidence and the lessons of its experience in the policy trenches. The current responsible minister and undisputed czar of multicultural policy, Jason Kenney, is a senior cabinet member trusted by the prime minister and less tethered than most ministers to the PMO’s leash and talking points. He also wields substantial influence as chair of the cabinet’s operations committee, which is tasked with the day-to-day coordination of the government’s agenda including issues management and communications. He has had significant success in weaning new Canadians from their attachment to the Liberals and wooing them to the Conservative banner. According to Griffith, Kenney – once cloaked in a robe by a Filipino organization and crowned on a throne with a sash festooned across his chest proclaiming him the “King of Multiculturalism” – actually endeavours to deemphasize older approaches to multiculturalism policy and to strengthen his government’s preferred narrative of Canadian citizenship.

Kenney’s determination to drive the bureaucracy and not be driven by it shines through. What emerges is this minister’s strong sense of purpose, which precipitated trauma among his officials. They were surprised the Conservatives assumed power with ready-made answers and conclusions rather than questions. Civil servants did not appreciate the Conservatives’ discomfort with long-standing multiculturalism and citizenship policies. For decades, bureaucrats had internalized the multicultural
regime established by Pierre Trudeau’s Liberals and extended by Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservatives and their Liberal successors. The “sharper ideological edge” (21) of the new Conservative vision harkens back to some Reform party positions of the 1990s: doing away with the Department of Multiculturalism and thus deemphasizing Canadians’ racial, cultural, and linguistic differences, i.e., dehyphenating Canadians. However, the Conservatives did break with Reform’s proposals to scale back immigration levels and give priority to “traditional” (i.e., European) sources of newcomers.

Much of the social science data collected by officials did not resonate with the minister and his political staffers, who drew on anecdotes and sources beyond the public service including like-minded think tanks and lobbyists and the minister’s extensive outreach to ethno-cultural communities. Griffith deploys the Kübler-Ross stages of grieving, especially denial, anger, and depression, to characterize the reactions of civil servants who had a hard time absorbing and digesting the Conservative agenda. To the minister, who listened but did not necessarily take advice, his public servants appeared disobedient, destructive, and resistant to change.

Government-issued citizenship study guides reflect the older and newer paradigms of Canadian citizenship. A Look at Canada, produced in 2000 under a Liberal regime, mentioned the Charter of Rights on five pages and emphasized democratic, legal, and equality rights along with fundamental freedoms. In contrast, the 2011 citizenship guide, Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship, mentions the Charter on one page and stresses responsibilities more than rights. Only the Charter’s preamble with its reference to God appears. The earlier guide contained relatively little history, the later guide stresses it, the military, the role of the Crown, and institutions. New Canadians, once handed a copy of the Charter at citizenship ceremonies, now receive a guide with a prominent photo of the Queen. In this respect, the Conservatives have much in common with the tory symbols championed by John Diefenbaker’s Progressive Conservatives a half century ago.

Griffith’s appendices reveal much. Between 2007 and 2011, Kenney directed 37, 30, and 10 speeches and statements to Jewish, Chinese, and Ukrainian groups respectively. He also spoke to a variety of Muslim groups as well as fraternal organizations such as those of Somalis and Pakistanis whose members are overwhelmingly Muslim. Muslims far outnumber Jews, but we learn from Griffiths that Jews are four times as likely to be victims of hate crimes. Reflecting Conservative concerns about “birth tourism” and bogus marriages, the backlog in processing in citizenship applications has exploded, from 27,000 in 2007 to 204,000 in 2012.

Few civil servants and social scientists would quarrel with Griffith’s lament regarding the scrapping of the mandatory long-form census and the government’s deprecation of scientific research. Neither of the counterpoints in the book’s title,
arrogance and innocent bias (however innocent the bias may be), are positive virtues.

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“Learning is a treasure which accompanies its owner everywhere.”
—Chinese proverb

“Better than a thousand days of diligent study is one day with a great teacher.”
—Japanese proverb

“Education is light, lack of it darkness.”
—Russian proverb

Source: Website of the National Education Association in Washington DC: http://www.nea.org

Teaching, Learning, and other Miracles by Grace Feuerverger is a genuine translation of the essence of the aforesaid proverbs. For example, in conformity with the Chinese proverb above, Feuerverger reflects on her school days and says, “I was given unimaginable treasure” (1). In this narrative book, the author shares with readers her autobiographical story with emphasis on the educational aspect.

Although the simple and straightforward title of this book does not reveal its rich content, a critical reader is able to benefit from its hidden treasures and use them as guidelines for life success. As well, choosing the word ‘miracles’ in the title is successful as it reflects the reality of most schools nowadays. The author’s message here is that miracles are already seen in some schools, while others still need miracles for change to happen. The introduction of the book gives an impression of the religious background of the author who considers “[A]n explanation of teaching and learning in schools as a sacred life journey” (1), and thinks that “[T]eaching became a pilgrim’s journey” (2) and that “[A] teacher can be a messenger...to his or her students” (3). In this ambitious work, Feuerverger reflects on her academic life, first as a student and later as a teacher. The book consists of a series of chronological episodes, each carrying a specific message to learners, teachers, and educators. The author successfully delivers those messages through discussing the main goals of this literary work.

“As a child of Holocaust survivors”, Feuerverger stated that one of the main goals behind writing this book was to give hope to the school children who suffered from war, violence, poverty, and abuse as well as for those who teach them (1).