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HOT BUTTON

Immigrants, Multiculturalism and
Canadian Citizenship

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presented at the symposium on

"Social Cohesion Through Social Justice"

Canadian Jewish Congress

Ottawa, November 2 1997

NB: the material in this paper is drawn from my forthcoming book
Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada
(Oxford University Press, 1998)

Immigrants, Multiculturalism and Canadian Citizenship

In 1971, Canada embarked on a unique experiment by declaring a policy of official "multi-culturalism". According to Pierre Trudeau, who introduced the policy in the House of Commons, the policy had the following four aims: to support the cultural development of ethnocultural groups; to help members of ethnocultural groups to overcome barriers to full participation in Canadian society; to promote creative encounters and interchange among all ethnocultural groups; and to assist new Canadians in acquiring at least one of Canada's official languages.

Although the policy of multiculturalism was first adopted by the federal government, it was explicitly designed as a model for other levels of government, and indeed it has been copied widely. 'Multiculturalism programs' can now be found, not just in the multiculturalism office of the federal government, but also at the provincial or municipal levels of government, and indeed within a wide range of public and private institutions, such as schools or businesses.

These policies are now under attack, perhaps more so today than at any time since 1971. The debate has heated up lately, in part because of two recent critiques of the multiculturalism policy: Neil Bissoondath's Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada (Penguin 1994), and Richard Gwyn's Nationalism Without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian (McClelland and Stewart, 1995). Both make very similar claims about the results of the policy. In particular, both argue that multiculturalism has promoted a form of ethnic separatism amongst immigrants.

Thus Bissoondath says that multiculturalism has led to "undeniable ghettoization" (111). Rather than promoting integration, multiculturalism is encouraging the idea that immigrants should form "self-contained" ghettos "alienated from the

mainstream". This ghettoization is "not an extreme of multiculturalism but its ideal: a way of life transported whole, a little outpost of exoticism preserved and protected" (110). He approvingly quotes Arthur Schlesinger's claim that multiculturalism rests upon a "cult of ethnicity" which "exaggerates differences, intensifies resentments and antagonisms, drives even deeper the awful wedges between races and nationalities. The endgame is self-pity and self-ghettoization" (98), or what Schlesinger calls "cultural and linguistic apartheid". According to Bissoondath, multiculturalism policy does not encourage immigrants to think of themselves as Canadians, and indeed even the children of immigrants "continue to see Canada with the eyes of foreigners. Multiculturalism, with its emphasis on the importance of holding on to the former or ancestral homeland, with its insistence that There is more important than Here, encourages such attitudes" (133).

Gwyn makes the same claim in similar language. He argues that "official multiculturalism encourages apartheid, or to be a bit less harsh, ghettoism" (274). The more multiculturalism policy has been in place, "the higher the cultural walls have gone up inside Canada" (8). Multiculturalism encourages ethnic leaders to keep their members "apart from the mainstream", practising "what can best be described as mono-culturalism". In this way, "Our state encourages these gatekeepers to maintain what amounts, at worst, to an apartheid form of citizenship" (234).

If these claims were true, it would be a serious indictment of the policy. Unfortunately, neither Bissoondath nor Gwyn provide any empirical evidence for their claims. In order to assess their claims, therefore, I have tried to collect together some statistics which might bear on the question of whether multiculturalism has promoted ethnic separatism, and discouraged or impeded integration. I will start with evidence from within Canada, comparing ethnocultural groups before and after the adoption of the multiculturalism policy in 1971. I will then consider comparative evidence, to see how Canada compares with other countries, particularly those countries which rejected the principle of official multiculturalism.

The Domestic Evidence

How has the adoption of multiculturalism in 1971 affected the integration of immigrant groups in Canada? To answer this question requires some account of what "integration" involves. It is one of the puzzling features of the Gwyn/Bissoondath critique that they do not define exactly what they mean by integration. However, we can piece together some of the things which they see as crucial ingredients of integration: adopting a Canadian identity rather than clinging exclusively to one's ancestral identity; participating in broader Canadian institutions rather than participating solely in ethnic-specific institutions; learning an official language rather than relying solely on one's mother-tongue; having inter-ethnic friendships or even mixed-marriages rather than socializing entirely within one's ethnic group. These sorts of criteria do not form a comprehensive theory of "integration", but they seem to be at the heart of Gwyn and Bissoondath's concerns about multiculturalism, so they are a good starting-point.

citizenship: I will start with the most basic form of integration - the decision of immigrants to become Canadian citizens. If the Gwyn/Bissoondath thesis were true, one would expect naturalization rates to have declined since the adoption of multiculturalism in 1971. In fact, however, naturalization rates have increased since 1971. This is particularly relevant since the economic incentives to naturalize have lessened over the last 25 years. Taking out Canadian citizenship is not needed to gain access to the labour market in Canada, or to have access to social benefits. There are virtually no differences between citizens and permanent residents in their civil rights or social benefits - the right to vote is the only major legal benefit gained by naturalization. The primary reason for immigrants to take out citizenship, therefore, is that they identify with Canada, they want to formalize their membership in Canadian society, and participate in the political life of the country. Moreover, if we examine which groups are most likely to naturalize, we find that it is the "multicultural groups" - that is, immigrants from non-traditional sources for whom the multiculturalism policy is most relevant - which have the highest rate of naturalization. By contrast, immigrants from the United States and United Kingdom - neither of whom are seen in popular discourse as an 'ethnic' or 'multicultural'

group - have the lowest rate of naturalization. In other words, those groups which fall most clearly under the multiculturalism policy have shown the greatest desire to become Canadian, while those groups which fall outside the multiculturalism rubric have shown the least desire to become Canadian.

political participation: If the Gwyn/Bissoondath thesis were true, one would expect the political participation of ethnic groups to have declined since the adoption of multiculturalism in 1971. After all, political participation is a symbolic affirmation of citizenship, and reflects an interest in the political life of the larger society. In fact, however, there is no evidence for a decline in participation. To take one relevant indicator, in the period prior to the adoption of multi-culturalism between Confederation and the 1960s, non-British, non-French groups became increasingly underrepresented in Parliament, but since then the trend has been reversed, so that today they have almost as many MPs as one would expect given their share of the population.

Moreover, it is important to note the way ethnocultural groups participate in Canadian politics. They do not form separate ethnic-based parties, either on a group-by-group basis or even on a coalition basis. Instead, they participate overwhelmingly within pan-Canadian parties. Indeed, the two parties in Canada which are closest to being ethnic parties were created by and for those of English or French ancestry - namely, the Parti/Bloc Québécois, whose support is overwhelmingly found amongst Quebecers with French ancestry; and the Reform party, whose support is concentrated amongst WASPs. And perhaps the purest case of an ethnic party in Canada - the COR Party - was exclusively a WASP-based party. By contrast, immigrants have shown no inclination to support ethnic-based political parties, and instead vote for the traditional national parties.

This is just one indicator of a more general point - namely, that immigrants are overwhelmingly supportive of, and committed to protecting, the basic political structure in Canada. We know that, were it not for the Aethnic vote@, the 1995 referendum on secession in Quebec would have succeeded. In that referendum, ethnics overwhelmingly expressed their commitment to Canada. More generally, all the indicators suggest that immigrants quickly absorb and accept Canada's basic

liberal-democratic values and constitutional principles, even if they came from countries which are illiberal or non-democratic. As Freda Hawkins puts it, "the truth is that there have been no riots, no breakaway political parties, no charismatic immigrant leaders, no real militancy in international causes, no internal political terrorism... immigrants recognize a good, stable political system when they see one".

In short, if we look at indicators of legal and political integration, we see that since the adoption of multiculturalism in 1971 immigrants are more likely to become Canadians, and more likely to participate politically. And when they do participate, they do so through pan-ethnic political parties which uphold Canada's basic liberal democratic principles.

This sort of political integration is the main aim of a democratic state. But I suspect that individual Canadians are often more concerned with the social integration of immigrants than their political integration. Immigrants who participate in politics may be good democratic citizens, but if they can't speak English or French, or are socially isolated in self-contained ethnic groups, then many Canadians will perceive a failure of integration. So let us shift to two indicators of societal integration, namely, official language acquisition and intermarriage rates.

official language competence: If the Gwyn/Bissoondath thesis were true, one would expect the desire of ethnocultural minorities to acquire official language competence to have declined since the adoption of multiculturalism in 1971. If immigrant groups are being "ghettoized", "alienated from the mainstream", and attempting to preserve their original way of life intact from their homeland, then presumably they have less reason to learn an official language.

In fact, however, demand for ESL and FSL classes has never been higher, and indeed exceeds supply in many cities. Recent census statistics show that 98.6% of Canadians say that they can speak one of the official languages. This is a staggering statistic when one considers how many immigrants are elderly and/or illiterate in their mother-tongue, and who therefore find it extremely difficult to learn a new language. It is especially impressive given that the number of immigrants who arrive with knowledge of an official language has declined since 1971. If we

set aside the elderly - who form the majority of Canadians who cannot speak an official language - the idea that there is a general decrease in immigrants' desire to learn an official language is absurd. Immigrants want to learn an official language, and do so. Insofar as their official language skills are lacking, the explanation is the lack of accessible and appropriate ESL classes, not the lack of desire.

Inter-marriage rates: One final indicator worth looking at is inter-marriage rates. If the Gwyn/Bissoondath thesis were true, one would expect inter-marriage rates to have declined since the adoption of multiculturalism in 1971, since the policy is said to have driven "even deeper the awful wedges between races and nationalities", and encouraged groups to retreat into their "monocultural" ghettos, and hide behind "cultural walls".

In fact, however, intermarriage rates have consistently increased since 1971. We see an overall decline in endogamy, both for immigrants and their native-born children. Moreover, we see a dramatic increase in social acceptance of mixed marriages. For example, whereas 52% of Canadians disapproved of black-white marriages in 1968, 81% approved of them in 1995.

In short, whether we look at naturalization, political participation, official language competence, or intermarriage rates, we see the same story. There is no evidence to support the claim that multiculturalism has decreased the rate of integration of immigrants, or increased the separatism or mutual hostility of ethnic groups.

If we examined other indicators, we would get the same story. As Orest Kruhlak puts it, "In sum, irrespective of which variables one examines, including [citizenship acquisition, ESL, mother-tongue retention, ethnic association participation, intermarriage] or political participation, the scope of economic involvement, or participation in mainstream social or service organizations, none suggest a sense of promoting ethnic separateness".

The Comparative Evidence

I can make the same point another way. If the Bissoondath/Gwyn thesis were correct, we would expect Canada to perform worse on these indicators of integration than other countries which have not adopted an official multiculturalism

policy. Both Gwyn and Bissoondath contrast the Canadian approach with the American approach, which exclusively emphasizes common identities and common values, and refuses to provide public recognition or affirmation of ethnocultural differences. If Canada fared worse than the U.S. in terms of integrating immigrants, this would provide some indirect support for the Bissoondath/Gwyn theory.

In fact, however, Canada fares better than the United States on virtually any dimension of integration. Canada has higher naturalization rates than the United States - indeed, much higher, almost double. We also have higher rates of political participation, higher rates of official language acquisition, and lower rates of residential segregation. Canada also has higher rates of inter-ethnic friendships, and much greater approval for inter-marriage. Whereas 72% of Canadians approved of inter-racial marriages in 1988, only 40% of Americans approved of them, and 25% felt they should be illegal!

In short, on every indicator of integration, Canada, with its multiculturalism policy, fares better than the United States, with its repudiation of multiculturalism. We would find the same story if we compared Canada with other immigration countries which have rejected multiculturalism in favour of an exclusive emphasis on common identities - eg., France.

Canada does better than these other countries, not only in our actual rates of integration, but also in our day-to-day sense of ethnic relations. In a 1997 survey, for example, people in twenty countries were asked whether they agreed that "different ethnic groups get along well here". The percentage of people who agreed was far higher in Canada (75%) than in the United States (58%) or France (51%).

This should not surprise us, since Canada does better than virtually any other country in the world in the integration of immigrants. The only comparable country is Australia, which is interesting, since it too has an official multiculturalism policy. Indeed, its multiculturalism policy was largely inspired by Canada's policy, although of course it has been adapted to Australia's circumstances. The two countries which are head and shoulders above the rest of the world in the successful integration of immigrants are the two countries with official multiculturalism policies.

They are much more successful than any country which has rejected multiculturalism.

In short, there is not a shred of evidence to support the claim that multiculturalism is promoting ethnic separateness or impeding immigrant integration. Whether we examine the trends within Canada since 1971, or compare Canada with other countries, the conclusion is the same - the multiculturalism program is working. It is achieving what it set out to do: it is helping to ensure that those people who wish to express their ethnic identity are respected and accommodated, while simultaneously increasing the ability of immigrants to integrate into the larger society. Along with our fellow multiculturalists in Australia, Canada does a better job of respecting ethnic diversity while promoting societal integration than any other country.

Explaining the Debate

This raises a genuine puzzle. Why do so many intelligent and otherwise well-informed commentators agree that multiculturalism policy is impeding integration? Part of the explanation is that many people have simply not examined the policy to see what it actually involves. For example, Gwyn and Bissoondath claim that multiculturalism tells new Canadians that they should practice "monoculturalism", preserving their inherited way of life intact, while not interacting with or learning from the members of other groups, or the larger society. According to Gwyn and Bissoondath, this sort of self-ghettoization is not so much an unintended consequence of the policy, but rather one of its explicit aims. Yet neither author quotes a single document published by the multiculturalism unit of the federal government to support this claim - none of their annual reports, demographic analysis, public education brochures, or program funding guidelines.

In reality, most of the focus of multiculturalism policy (and most of its funding) has been directed to promoting civic participation in the larger society, and to increasing mutual understanding and cooperation between the members of different ethnic groups. More generally, the multiculturalism policy has never stated or implied that people are under any duty or obligation to retain their ethnic

identity/practices "freeze-dried", or indeed to retain them at all. On the contrary, the principle that individuals should be free to choose whether to maintain their ethnic identity has been one of the cornerstones of the policy since 1971, and continues to guide existing multiculturalism programs. Multiculturalism is intended to make it possible for people to retain and express their identity with pride if they so choose, by reducing the legal, institutional, economic or societal obstacles to this expression. It does not penalize or disapprove of people who choose not to identify with their ethnic group, or describe them as poor citizens or as lesser Canadians. One could multiply examples of these sorts of misinterpretations of the basic guidelines and purposes of the policy. But I think these are just symptoms of a deeper problem. The real problem, I think, is that critics of multiculturalism view the policy in isolation, as if it was the only government policy affecting the integration of immigrants. But multiculturalism is not the only, or even the primary, policy affecting the integration of immigrants. Instead, it is a modest part of a larger package of policies, which includes citizenship, education and employment policies. It is these other policies which are the major engines of integration. They all encourage, pressure, even legally force immigrants to take steps towards integrating into Canadian society.

For example, it is a legal requirement for gaining citizenship that the immigrant know an official language (unless they are elderly), as well as some basic information about Canadian history and institutions. Similarly, it is a legal requirement under provincial education acts that the children of immigrants learn an official language, and learn a common core curriculum. Moreover, immigrants must know an official language to gain access to government-funded job training programs. Immigrants must know an official language in order to receive professional accreditation, or to have their foreign training recognized. The most highly skilled pharmacist won't be granted a professional license to practice pharmacy in Canada if she can only speak Portuguese. And of course knowledge of an official language is a precondition for working in the bureaucracy, or to gain government contract work.

These citizenship, education and employment policies have always been the major pillars of government-sponsored integration in Canada, and they remain fully in place today. Moreover, if we examine the amount of money spent on these policies, it eclipses the money spent on multiculturalism. The government spends billions of dollars a year on language training and job training for immigrants, and on education for their children, compared to under \$20 million a year for multiculturalism programs.

So Canada spends billions of dollars encouraging and pressuring immigrants to integrate into common educational, economic, and political institutions operating in either French or English. This is the context within which multiculturalism operates, and multiculturalism can only be understood in this wider context. With such a tiny budget, multiculturalism could not possibly hope to compete with this government-sponsored integration, and does not try to do so. On the contrary, from the very beginning, multiculturalism has explicitly gone hand-in-hand with government measures to promote societal integration.

For example, one of the guiding principles of multiculturalism has been to promote official bilingualism in Canada. This is reflected in the very terminology which Trudeau employed when introducing the policy - namely, "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework". It has been explicit from the beginning that multiculturalism works alongside the linguistic and institutional integration of immigrants.

Some critics see the phrase "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework" as incoherent or meaningless. But I think it has a very simple and compelling meaning. The idea is this: if Canada is going to pressure immigrants to integrate into common institutions operating in English or French, then we need to ensure that the terms of integration are fair. To my mind, this has two basic elements:

(a) we need to recognize that integration does not occur overnight, but rather is a difficult and long-term process which operates inter-generationally. Hence special accommodations are often required for immigrants on a transitional basis. For example, certain services should be available in the immigrants' mother tongue, and support should be provided for those groups and organizations within immigrant communities which assist in the settlement/integration process;

(b) we need to ensure that the common institutions into which immigrants are pressured to integrate provide the same degree of respect, recognition and accommodation of the identities and practices of ethnocultural minorities as they traditionally have been of WASP and French-Canadian identities. Otherwise, the promotion of English and French as official languages is tantamount to privileging the lifestyles of the descendants of the English or French settlers.

This requires a systematic exploration of our social institutions to see whether their rules, structures and symbols disadvantage immigrants. For example, we need to examine dress-codes, public holidays, or even height and weight restrictions to see whether they are biased against certain immigrant groups. We need to examine the portrayal of minorities in school curricula or the media to see if they are stereotypical, or fail to recognize the contributions of ethnocultural groups to Canadian history or world culture. And so on.

These measures are needed to ensure that Canada is offering immigrants fair terms of integration. The idea of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework is, I think, precisely an attempt to define such fair terms of integration. And in my view, the vast majority of what is done under the heading of multiculturalism policy, not only at the federal level, but also at provincial and municipal levels, and indeed within school boards and private companies, can be defended as promoting fair terms of integration.

Others may disagree with the fairness of some of these policies. The requirements of fairness are not always obvious, particularly in the context of people who have chosen to enter a country. How to define fair terms of integration is a debate that we can and should have. The claim that multiculturalism is anti-integrationist, however, is a red herring.