

Multiculturalism: What Does Multiculturalism Mean Today?

Canadians often say that they live in a multicultural society or a cultural mosaic. The idea of multiculturalism is embedded in the Canadian constitution and in Canadian legislation.

Subject Matter Expert
Stephanie Dotto

Preliminary Discussion: Is multiculturalism still viable for Canada today?

Discussion Overview

Has the recent trend towards increased security and suspicion of immigration in the US and Europe changed the way in which Canadians value multiculturalism? Do we still subscribe to the concept of a cultural mosaic and if so, how could we better accommodate it?

[Trent Team \(Discussion Moderator\)](#) • April 5, 2017 at 09:05 am

Welcome to the conversation, everybody! Some scholars have criticized the Canadian government's approach to multiculturalism as being a cosmetic celebration of the "three F's": fashion, food, and festivals, at the expense of a deeper commitment to anti-racism and to addressing the very real inequalities ethnic minorities face. Many Canadians love the ideal of a welcoming and multicultural Canada, but to what expense does this ideal reflect the Canadian reality?

[Elaine Foulkes](#) • April 5, 2017 at 09:49 am

For me personally, recent sensitivities about diversity in other parts of the world has reinforced the importance of Canada's ideal concept of a cultural mosaic. That has been an underlying ideal for me since its introduction during the days of PM PE Trudeau's leadership. It is extremely important to me. It has shocked me how many younger Canadians are not even familiar with the term - assuming Canada to adhere to the cultural melting-pot concept in the US. It is time for us to raise the concept in the public's mind and to educate toward its practice. All that said, it is very challenging to apply this image in daily life; increasingly so as our nation's mosaic becomes even more diverse. I do believe it is the way forward, and is the way for Canada to remain. It needs to move beyond festivals etc. although that is part of it for sure. I strongly oppose the ideas being put forward by some CPC members to 'screen immigrants for agreement with "Canadian values"'. However, I do believe that the immigration or citizenship process is a way to introduce new Canadians to our value of being a cultural mosaic. I also think this concept needs to be given greater prominence in civic education (within schools and in life-long learning contexts).

[Trent Team \(Discussion Moderator\)](#) • April 6, 2017 at 02:23 pm

Hi Elaine! On the note of educating Canadians about the cultural mosaic, I think it's interesting (and upsetting) that so many Canadians born here have no idea how the Canadian immigration process works. There have been many comments about how only "screened" immigrants and refugees should be allowed into Canada, with absolutely no awareness of the fact that all immigrants and refugees go through rigorous, multi-step screening processes. If more Canadians were aware of how onerous the

process of immigrating is, there might be more respect for the difficult journeys immigrants have taken to arrive here.

- Stephanie

[Andrew Griffith](#) • April 11, 2017 at 02:23 pm

Trent Team (Discussion Moderator) wrote on April 6:

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I find the use of the term "cultural mosaic" a bit dated and shallow. I find the earlier definitions of integration as distinct from assimilation (Bi and Bi report, Canada Year Book 1959) more useful.

The current government definition, as used by IRCC, is the shallow "two-way street" which doesn't capture the ongoing dynamic and push and pull of integration. Harald Bauder uses Hegel to explain: host society as the thesis, newcomers as the anti-thesis, and the interaction resulting in a new synthesis, one that is an ongoing process. See

my https://www.google.com/url?q=http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/september-2016/integration-and-multiculturalism-finding-a-new-metaphor/&sa=U&ved=0ahUKEwivyOGCg53TAhWE34MKHSFFCPkQFggHMAE&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNG0swo_VZtooPBif3SbyYGzCPNIwg

[Stephanie Dotto](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • April 12, 2017 at 12:32 pm

Hi Andrew

I do think the cultural mosaic is powerful metaphor that many feel great attachment to — I certainly did when I was younger — because it's visually striking and speaks to a kind of Canadian ideal. It is also, as people have remarked above, much better than the melting pot metaphor. That said, just because a metaphor is powerful does not mean it's accurate and appropriate, and I agree with you that it is a bit shallow, particularly in terms of obscuring the ways that certain dominant groups within Canada have exploited and marginalized other minority and racialized groups ("multicultural" communities, as it were) in the on-going process of nation-building.

The Bauder definition of thesis/anti-thesis/synthesis as you describe it is interesting, in part because it acknowledges the fact that newcomer Canadians *will* change Canada (as they have always done), and this need not be a scary or threatening thing, but rather a dynamic process involving participation from all sides.

I wonder if holding up current Canadians as "thesis" and newcomer or immigrant Canadians as "anti-thesis" has the effect of essentializing both groups. It may suggest an internal homogeneity amongst

current Canadians or amongst newcomer Canadians that does not necessarily reflect the complex and varied groups of people who make up this country's citizens and newcomers. In the same vein, are newcomer Canadians actually the antithesis of Canada-born Canadians?

Andrew Griffith wrote on April 11:

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[Andrew Griffith](#) • April 12, 2017 at 04:23 pm

Stephanie Dotto wrote on April 12:

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No matter what the metaphor or the construct, there will be simplification involved. But of course, no community is monolithic, nor are groups of communities monolithic. So whenever I use a duality, I try to ensure that the richness within and between is not lost. The Hegelian dialectic occurs within as well as between.

[Bruce Bauer](#) • April 15, 2017 at 07:43 pm

My view on multiculturalism is that it is a flawed concept P. Trudeau used to divide Canada. You only have to look at Quebec to see how flawed it really is. They are the only province that did not accept the repatriated constitution and they are the only province where one language is the law. I think P. Trudeau was a closet separatist and as the one in power he played it so that the only province that got to keep its identity was and is and provided they never sign the constitution, is Quebec. I also feel his son with his statement that Canada has no core identity and that we are the first post national state is also aimed at the rest of Canada but not Quebec.

[Stephanie Dotto](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • April 16, 2017 at 12:39 pm

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Hi Bruce

I am wondering about your comment that Quebec is the only province that got to "keep its identity" post-state multiculturalism. I understand cultural identity as a living, evolving phenomenon subject to changes both internal and external. If we want to talk about a "traditional" Canadian identity, we are talking about an identity founded on white Anglo-Canadian dominance, and the exclusion, oppression, and exploitation of other groups. While multiculturalism does gloss over this disturbing history, I don't think anything has been lost by acknowledging, encouraging and celebrating the contributions of more marginalized groups.

There are a lot of scholars that would agree with you that Pierre Trudeau used multiculturalism as a sort of political tool to control Quebec, but they actually interpret multiculturalism as a way for Trudeau to bring Quebec into the federalist fold. Himani Bannerji, for example, argues that by defining Canada in terms of its multicultural difference, Trudeau made it so that Quebec could not assert its difference as a reason to separate. She describes multiculturalism as "an antidote to any, and especially Quebec's, separatism."

Regardless, I agree that many Quebecers see multiculturalism as a threat to the minority French language and Quebec "culture," and as a result multiculturalism takes on a different flavour in Quebec.

[Bruce Bauer](#) • April 16, 2017 at 01:29 pm

Stephanie Dotto wrote on April 16:

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Regardless, I agree that many Quebecers see multiculturalism as a threat to the minority French language and Quebec "culture," and as a result multiculturalism takes on a different flavour in Quebec.

I disagree with the intent or happenstance that multiculturalism brought Quebec in to the federal fold. They are the only province that has jurisdiction over immigration into said province. They used that to foster immigration from other French speaking countries. They are the only province in Canada that has a one language provision. I also note that you recognize that Quebec has a culture. Apparently the English culture is not something anyone wants to champion these days. So our multiculturalism is only a means of diluting the English culture. For a country that proudly proclaims to the world that we had two founding nations this is slap in the face to all Anglais. P. Trudeau knew that Quebec could never go it alone and that is why he allowed Quebec to abstain from signing the constitution and gave them control over immigration. A PM is supposed to want what is best for all of Canadians not just the province he comes from. His actions set the agenda for successive liberal governments to whittle away at English Canada's core identity until his son declared that we no longer have on. How do you think that makes the English speaking Canadians that helped build this country feel.

[Stephanie Dotto](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • April 16, 2017 at 02:03 pm

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Hi Bruce

Sometimes the power of a majority culture is that it, and the privilege it confers, appears invisible to those who belong to it. For better or worse, English-Canadian culture is prevalent throughout this country. English is the most-spoken language in the country and one of its two official languages; we have a system of government based on the British system; we have some of the same holidays as the British (e.g., Boxing Day); many of our cities, provinces, and streets have British names; and we

recognize Britain as one of the "founding nations" of this country. Provincial curriculums emphasize the historical importance of various white Anglo explorers, politicians, businesspeople, etc., while often neglecting to discuss other minority groups who played an important role in our history. Celebrations of Scottish and Irish culture (dancing, sport, food, music) are also ubiquitous. We use British spelling and participate in events like the Commonwealth Games. Canadians are avid watchers of BBC programming on television and Netflix. Several provincial flags incorporate the Union Jack. If there are erasures in our culture and history, they are generally at the expense of Indigenous people and other minority groups.

I do not agree that the presence of other cultures "dilutes" a majority culture. Anthropologists point out that with few exceptions, culture is intrinsically dynamic and porous. For example, nothing seems as British as a cup of tea — but the British wouldn't have tea if not for trade with countries like China or India. Crêpes seem inherently French, but it was the Bretons who introduced crêpes to France. The Union Jack itself is an amalgam of the symbols of England, Scotland and Ireland. These are obviously surface-level examples, but nevertheless, the notion of cultural "purity" has no basis in social reality and is a concept that has historically done far more harm than good.

[Bruce Bauer](#) • April 16, 2017 at 07:53 pm

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Hi Stephanie, I can see that we are most likely going to disagree on a lot of points. The history taught in schools today pales in comparison to the history taught when I went to school, back in the 50's to the 70's. And history back then was also tied in with geography. We had a rounded world encompassing curriculum. My daughter would come home from school, she went from the late 80's until the early 2000's which included high school and university, and I would ask her questions about the world and history in general. A fair bit of the time she was astounded by my answers when she could not come up with one. Not too sure what they teach them nowadays but one of my favorite sayings is that this

generation is heading for the lowest common denominator. Not to be a smart ass but I would wager that you are a left leaning liberal. Look at what multiculturalism is doing to Europe. Legal, vetted immigration is fine, unfettered immigration is wrong. We have laws that all of a sudden are not enforced all because our PM has an agenda. His allowing the Islamaphobia motion to proceed was pandering plain and simple. Or was it something more sinister?

[Stephanie Dotto](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • April 17, 2017 at 02:30 pm

Bruce Bauer wrote on April 16:

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Hi Bruce

For context, I do not consider myself a liberal (whether small- or large-L), but rather am a feminist committed to anti-racist, anti-oppression, and anti-colonialist politics. My political views do not come from blind adherence to doctrine but rather from lived experience and years of study. More specifically, my views on multiculturalism are formed from not only working on a PhD in Canadian Studies, but also growing up in the Vancouver area during a time of huge immigration to the region, living and working as an adult in diverse Toronto neighbourhoods, as well as spending time as a young adult living in somewhat less ethnically diverse places, including New Brunswick and Brittany, France.

1) I see no wisdom or fairness in making negative generalizations about an entire generation of young people, but I will say that if there are empirical gaps in their knowledge, it could be as much about the underfunding of public education and the overcrowding of classrooms as about the content of the lessons or the ability and motivation of the students.

If you are interested in knowing what students are learning in school today, the Ontario curricula are publicly accessible online here: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/sshg.html> and here: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/canworld.html> I would wager that other provincial curricula can be easily found through a Google search. I have studied the Ontario Social Studies Curriculum as part of my dissertation work. It is a formidable document that stretches hundreds of pages and covers geography and world history, early civilizations, and Canadian history. While I have not studied curricula from earlier decades, I suspect the incorporation of the historical experiences of minority groups has made the curriculum more, rather than less, comprehensive. For example, I wonder if previous generations of students learned about the Chinese Head Tax, the Anti-Asian Exclusion League, the Komagata Maru, residential schools, Japanese/Ukrainian/Italian internment camps, Black

Loyalists, Africville, Canadian slavery, the Sixties Scoop, etc. I know that most of this, and more, is in the Ontario curriculum, and I also learned a lot of it in public school in British Columbia in the early 2000s.

2) My understanding of current terrorist attacks in Europe is that they are not the result of "soft" multicultural policies (I don't think many European countries embrace multiculturalism to the extent that Canada does), but rather occur in the context of assimilationist and exclusionist policies that deeply alienate ethnic minorities. This does not justify terrorism — nothing does — but nor does it justify the harsh and unjust treatment of people seeking a better life. History shows us that this kind of treatment indeed tends to create more problems than it solves.

3) You said "We have laws that all of a sudden are not enforced all because our PM has an agenda." There is no evidence that Trudeau has stopped enforcing immigration and refugee law, and ample evidence that he is enforcing the laws that were in place under Harper, including the controversial Third-Country Agreement.

4) I see nothing sinister in a non-binding resolution against Islamophobia, particularly since many such resolutions have been passed previously regarding other minority populations. What is sinister to me is the Islamophobia that manifests itself in racist protests, terrorist attacks in mosques that take the lives of Canadians, and death threats against the MP who tabled the motion.

I'm not going to be able to join this discussion again until Wednesday. Until then, I invite anybody who managed to read through this tome to check out these articles on some of the issues I've discussed. There's more to read in our resources section above as well.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/safe-third-country-agreement-to-stay-pledges-immigration-minister-1.4046998>

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/02/16/liberal-mp-swamped-by-hate-mail-threats-over-anti-islamophobia-motion-in-commons.html>

http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/richad-hirani/motion-103-canadian-values_b_15617336.html

[Bruce Bauer](#) • April 17, 2017 at 10:24 pm

Stephanie Dotto wrote on April 16:

Hi Bruce

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Stephanie, Your first line in your comment above echoes the left leaning diatribe concerning white privilege, a liberal term used to define those that do not agree with their immigration agenda, their indigenous agenda and their feminist agenda yet in a later comment you profess to not be a left leaning liberal. You may not label yourself but your words certainly do. What is happening in Canada concerning anyone right of center is the same reason Trump was elected in the USA. You keep saying you want dialogue when in fact what you really want is agreement with your agenda. Anyone right of center is labeled as racist, bigoted, privileged, cultural appropriationists, climate change deniers, etc. When a study comes out that shows your faults it is glossed over as not important but when a study comes out that shows the rights faults it is the biggest thing since macaroni (oh dear me that old cultural appropriation thing). Like all left of center thinkers, some in my own family, they really do not want a discussion so much as a capitulation. It shows in their comments, it shows in the liberal governments agenda, it shows in the governments disregard for what 50% of Canadians think.

[Stephen Schwab](#) • April 20, 2017 at 01:01 am

Now more than ever Canada needs to lead; and multiculturalism is one of the greatest strengths Canada has to offer the world, besides maybe easy access to natural resources. The whole idea of multiculturalism is so fragile. It wouldn't take long to destroy it but it sure would take a long time to rebuild.

I am an immigrant, from the United States, of German-Dutch Mexican-Indian heritage, born in Japan. My heart and my loyalty are in Canada. I so admired Adrienne Clarkson as Governor General, but I began to worry as fear and xenophobia tore at the fabric of multiculturalism during the ten years Stephen Harper was Prime Minister. I thought, "This is not the direction I want my country to move."

We actually should be very proud of ourselves. In the little village of Warkworth alone, for example, I know Jamaican, English, Venezuelan, U.S., and German immigrants, not to mention Quebecois. Unfortunately I have yet to make any first nations friends. This whole idea of multiculturalism is not easy. In fact, it's hard. We should disregard the populism to the south and focus on what is important to our dreams. All of us: First Nations, Quebecois, Newfoundlanders, and Canadians from all walks of life. We'll get there if we don't let the fears and rumbling from the United States frighten us too much.

• Post Awarded 5 DR

[Heather Nicol](#) • April 24, 2017 at 05:41 am

Bruce Bauer wrote on April 16:

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2000's which included high school and university, and I would ask her questions about the world and history in general. A fair bit of the time she was astounded by my answers when she could not come up with one. Not too sure what they teach them nowadays but one of my favorite sayings is that this generation is heading for the lowest common denominator. Not to be a smart ass but I would wager that you are a left leaning liberal. Look at what multiculturalism is doing to Europe. Legal, vetted immigration is fine, unfettered immigration is wrong. We have laws that all of a sudden are not enforced all because our PM has an agenda. His allowing the Islamaphobia motion to proceed was pandering plain and simple. Or was it something more sinister?

Hi Bruce I just can't let your comment concerning how what is taught now pales in comparison to what you learned at school go unchallenged. Try taking a university degree today, before you judge. You might be surprised. Learning has changed, to be sure, but if it did not, we would not have a generation equipped to face the contemporary world.

[Stephanie Dotto](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • April 26, 2017 at 01:20 pm

Stephen Schwab wrote on April 20:

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Thanks very much for your input, Stephen. I think you're completely right about the fragility of multiculturalism — history as well as current-day events show how easy it is to fracture and destroy attitudes of tolerance and even celebration of diversity. Often this is done by powerful people who can consolidate their power by dividing the population against each other. Multiculturalism is deeply imperfect but there are certain alternatives that would be infinitely worse.

[Stephanie Dotto](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • April 26, 2017 at 01:41 pm

We are beginning to hear more and more critiques of the federal government's decision to continue to enforce the Safe Third Country Agreement have begun, which mandates that refugees make claims in the first "safe country" in which they arrive. Because the agreement designates the US as a safe country, refugees fearing deportation from the US (more likely under the new Trump regime) can no longer make a claim at the Canadian border without being immediately turned back to the US, and can only make a claim if they are already on Canadian soil. This has led to an increase of refugees risking their lives and

well-being to make illegal crossings into Canada away from border checkpoints so that they can then make an asylum claim. This is not only dangerous for the refugees, but it also puts stress on local law enforcement and the RCMP, and it gives rise to an illegal smuggling industry.

The government is also refusing to commit to offering refugee status to the gay men in Chechnya who are being interned in concentration camps, on the bureaucratic grounds that individuals must be outside their country of origin before applying for resettlement.

(<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/gay-men-are-being-persecuted-in-chechnya-but-canada-says-its-not-our-problem/article34769669/>).

I wonder how these situations square with the government's ostensible commitment to multiculturalism. Why are the Liberals projecting an image of a benevolent Canada if they are not willing to demonstrate a commitment to helping certain vulnerable multicultural minorities come here? Is it possible that the Liberals can benefit politically from their benevolent, multicultural image without matching action with words? To what standards should we hold ourselves and our government?

[Jared Milne](#) • April 28, 2017 at 12:18 pm

As much as I value multiculturalism, I think we need to re-orient it in a Canadian context.

Too often it's interpreted as "anything goes" in terms of culture, and that previous history and identity don't matter at all. New arrivals have no responsibility to adapt to the existing culture-rather, the onus is supposedly on the existing people to accommodate the new arrivals, whatever their cultural practices. When established people say they expect new arrivals to learn English and/or French, or follow certain other cultural expectations, they feel like they're being attacked as racist or colonialist. This is what Bruce Beadle seems to be getting at.

That is at the root of Francophone Quebec's concerns, but we also see it much more these days in Anglophone Canada, with the support for border controls, and the controversy over Chinese signs in Richmond, B.C. Quebec seems to me to have been one of the only places where 'reasonable accommodation' is openly discussed, where there's been an attempt to hash out exactly what the responsibilities of both established populations and new immigrants should be. In too many other places, people in my experience feel that attempting to question multiculturalism and laying out expectations for immigrants will just lead to their being attacked as racist, instead of having their questions answered.

Not to mention that Indigenous people feel very strongly about their particular rights and status in Canada, and deeply resent any notion that they are 'just another ethnic group'. Advocating such leads Indigenous people, in my experience, to associate them with calls for assimilation...when the Treaties, the very instruments that give Canada any sort of legal access to land, explicitly give Indigenous people special rights and status.

So I think it would help to more specifically get an idea of what multiculturalism means in the Canadian context. Canadian history is important here, to understand why French is so important to Quebecers, why English is dominant in the rest of the country, why English and French have special minority language rights that Spanish or German do not, and why Indigenous peoples' Treaty rights must be recognized. The works of Will Kymlicka have been especially useful in this regard-supporting multiculturalism, but explaining how it should fit in a Canadian context.

In fact, I rather like Quebec's concept of "interculturalism" that, as I understand it, lays out some of the basic expectations for immigrants (most notably that French is the main language of society, and that immigrants should be expected to learn it) but that new cultural influences are welcome and bring about positive change. Again, the historic perspective is important here-national identities change and grow with time. Some of their characteristics remain the same, but others do not, particularly as new influences and ideas come in. It's not revolutionary-it's evolutionary.

Maybe we need more of these types of debates in Anglophone Canada-and I'm glad to see Canadian Differences contributing to that.

[Stephanie Dotto](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • April 29, 2017 at 03:42 pm

This topic is closing as of May 1, so I'm going to wrap up by saying that I've found this conversation to be an interesting and edifying sampling of various perceptions different Canadians have of multiculturalism, whether as an ideal, a government policy, or as a daily way of relating to those around us. In this age of fake news, dog whistle journalism, and a frenzy of misdirected populist anger, it is important to ground our discussion in historical fact and social reality. The sources above are a great place to start, and should remain in place after the discussion ends.

[Trent Team \(Discussion Moderator\)](#) • April 29, 2017 at 03:51 pm

After a very successful series of 30 open discussions, the current interactive Canadian Difference website is now coming to a close.

We want to thank everyone for expressing interest and, as such, recognizing the importance of an environment where insightful national discussions can take place on issues important to Canada and on the role of Mutual Accommodation.

As the Canadian Difference project moves into its next phase, keep your eye on the website over the summer for announcements, events, and resources.

-The Trent Team

[Stephanie Dotto](#) (Subject Matter Expert) • April 30, 2017 at 04:33 pm

Jared Milne wrote on April 28:

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Hi Jared

Thanks for your comments here! I agree with your comments about treating Indigenous peoples as just another "multicultural" ethnic group (especially given the massive cultural diversity amongst Indigenous groups). The failure to accord Indigenous groups the respect and place they deserve is one of the more glaring deficits of multiculturalism.

I wonder what you mean when you say, "New arrivals have no responsibility to adapt to the existing culture"? In the case of Richmond (a city just over the river from where I grew up and where I have personally never felt alienated as a white person) and Chinese signage, only 3.5% of signs were solely in Chinese, and the issue seems to have fizzled since 2015 (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/richmond-s-chinese-only-sign-debate-leads-to-poster-crackdown-1.3082090>). It seems to me that by and large, immigrants have to enrol their children in Canadian schools, follow Canadian laws, learn either English or French (and if they do not, certainly their children do at school), pay Canadian taxes, go through a citizenship process that involves learning about Canada, get jobs like other Canadians, etc. Moreover, the ways that they keep their home culture, or push "established Canadian" acceptance of their difference, actually winds up enriching the whole country, in terms of things like food, literature, and the arts, and also in terms of human rights, and acknowledging and attempting to overcome historical wrongs.