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Multiculturalism

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No place

like home

Neil Bissoondath uncovers the cracks in Canada's multicultural mosaic.

THREE or four years into the new millennium, Toronto, Canada's largest city, will mark an unusual milestone. In a city of three million, the words 'minorities' and 'majority' will be turned on their heads and the former will become the latter.

Reputed to be the most ethnically diverse city in the world, Toronto has been utterly remade by immigration, just as Canada has been remade by a quarter-century of multiculturalism.

It is a policy which has been quietly disastrous for the country and for immigrants themselves.

The stated purpose of Canada's Multiculturalism Act (1971) is to recognize 'the existence of communities whose members share a common origin and their historic contribution to Canadian society'. It promises to 'enhance their development' and to 'promote the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins'. The bicultural (English and French) nature of the country is to be wilfully refashioned into a multicultural 'mosaic'.

The architects of the policy - the Government of then-Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau - were blind to the fact that their exercise in social engineering was based on two essentially false premises. First, it assumed that 'culture' in the large sense could be transplanted. Second, that those who voluntarily sought a new life in a new country would *wish* to transport their cultures of origin.

But 'culture' is a most complex creature; in its essence, it represents the very breath of a people. For the purposes of multiculturalism, the concept has been reduced to the simplest theatre. Canadians, neatly divided into 'ethnic' and otherwise, encounter each other's mosaic tiles mainly at festivals. There's traditional music, traditional dancing, traditional food at distinctly untraditional prices, all of which is diverting as far as it goes - but such encounters remain at the level of a folkloric Disneyland.

We take a great deal of self-satisfaction from such festivals; they are seen as proof of our open-mindedness, of our welcoming of difference. Yet how easily we forget that none of our ethnic cultures seems to have produced poetry or literature or philosophy worthy of our consideration. How seductive it is, how reassuring, that Greeks are always Zorbas, Ukrainians always Cossacks: we come away with stereotypes reinforced.

Not only are differences highlighted, but individuals are defined by those differences. There are those who find pleasure in playing to the theme, those whose ethnicity ripens with the years. Yet to play the ethnic, deracinated and costumed, is to play the stereotype. It is to abdicate one's full humanity in favour of one of its exotic features. To accept the role of ethnic is also to accept a gentle marginalization. It is to accept that one will never be just a part of the landscape but always a little apart from it, not quite belonging.

In exoticizing and trivializing cultures, often thousands of years old, by sanctifying the mentality of the mosaic-tile, we have succeeded in creating mental ghettos for the various communities. One's sense of belonging to the larger Canadian landscape is tempered by a loyalty to a different cultural or racial heritage.

When, for instance, war broke out between Croatia and Serbia, a member of the Ontario legislature, who was of Croatian descent, felt justified in declaring: 'I don't think I'd be able to live next door to a Serb.' That he was speaking of a fellow Canadian was irrelevant. *Over there* mattered more than *over here* - and the cultural group dictated the loyalty. Ironic for a country that boasted about its leading role in the fight against apartheid.

Often between groups one looks in vain for the quality that Canadians seem to value above all - tolerance. We pride ourselves on being a tolerant country, unlike the United States, which seems to demand of its immigrants a kind of submission to American mythology. But not only have we surrendered a great deal of ourselves in pursuit of the ideal - Christmas pageants have been replaced by 'Winterfests'; the anti-racist Writers Union of Canada sanctioned a 1994 conference which excluded whites - but tolerance itself may be an overrated quality, a flawed ideal.

The late novelist Robertson Davies pointed out that *tolerance* is but a weak sister to *acceptance*. To tolerate someone is to put up with them; it is to adopt a pose of indifference. Acceptance is far more difficult, for it implies engagement, understanding, an appreciation of the human similarities beneath the obvious differences. Tolerance then is superficial - and perhaps the highest goal one can expect of Canadian multiculturalism.

Another insidious effect of this approach is a kind of provisional citizenship. When 100-metre sprinter Ben Johnson won a

gold medal at the Seoul Olympics, he was hailed in the media as the great Canadian star. Days later, when the medal was rescinded because of a positive drug test, Johnson became the Jamaican immigrant - Canadian when convenient, a foreigner when not. Tolerated, never truly accepted, his exoticism always part of his finery, he quickly went from being one of *us* to being one of *them*.

This makes for an uneasy social fabric. In replacing the old Canada, based on British and French tradition, with a mosaic (individual tiles separated by cement), we have shaken our sense of identity. In a country over 130 years old, we are still uncertain who we are.

A major 1993 study found that 72 per cent of the population wants, as one newspaper put it, 'the mosaic to melt'. Canadians were found to be 'increasingly intolerant' of demands for special treatment made by ethnic groups - a Chinese group who wanted a publicly funded separate school where their children would be taught in Chinese by Chinese teachers; a Muslim group who claimed the right to opt out of the Canadian judicial system in favour of Islamic law. Canadians wanted immigrants to adopt Canada's values and way of life.

Many immigrants agree. They recognize that multiculturalism has not served their interests. It has exoticized, and so marginalized, them, making the realization of their dreams that much harder. The former rector of the Université du Québec à Montréal, Claude Corbo, himself the grandson of Italian immigrants, has pointed out that multiculturalism has kept many immigrants 'from integrating naturally into the fabric of Canadian and Quebec society... We tell people to preserve their original patrimony, to conserve their values, even if these values are incompatible with those of our society.'

Which leads to the other false premise on which multiculturalism is based. It assumes that people who choose to emigrate not only can but also *wish to remain* what they once were.

The act of emigration leaves no-one unscathed. From the moment you board a plane bound for a new land with a one-way ticket, a psychological metamorphosis begins - and the change occurs more quickly, more deeply and more imperceptibly than one imagines.

I arrived alone in Toronto from Trinidad in 1973, an 18-year-old with dreams but no experience of the world. A year later, I returned to Trinidad to visit my parents. Within days I realized the extent of the change that had come not only to me, but to all I had left behind. Even after so short a time, old friends had become new strangers, and old places remained only old places. Already Trinidad - its ways, its views, its very essences - was receding, becoming merely a memory of place and childhood experience. *Feeling* had already been wholly transferred to the new land, to this other country which had quickly become my home. Certainly, for others the process is slower and often less evident - but it is inexorable. The human personality is not immutable.

Multiculturalism, which asked that I bring to Canada the life I had in Trinidad, was a shock to me. I was seeking a new start in a land that afforded me that possibility. I was *not* seeking to live in Toronto as if I were still in Trinidad - for what would have been the point of emigration? I am far from alone in this. As the political scientist Professor Rias Khan of the University of Winnipeg put it: 'People, regardless of their origin, do not emigrate to preserve their culture and nurture their ethnic distinctiveness... Immigrants come here to become Canadians; to be productive and contributing members of their chosen society... Whether or not I preserve my cultural background is my personal choice; whether or not an ethnic group preserves its cultural background is the group's choice. The state has no business in either.'

The immigrant dream - of financial and social success; of carving out a place within the larger society - is grand in its simplicity. Requiring great courage, it is self-limiting on no level. All one asks is the freedom and fairness - through anti-discrimination legislation, if necessary - to fulfil one's potential. A vital part of that freedom is the latitude to recognize and welcome inevitable change in society and the migrant. One may treasure a private, personal identity built from family lore and experience, all the while pursuing the public integration vital to wider success. To be put in the position of either

obliterating the past or worshipping it is, for the individual, an unnecessary burden that leads to a false and limiting theatre of the self.

Not long ago, my daughter's teacher wanted to know what kind of family the children in her first-grade class came from. For most of the children, born in Quebec City into francophone families that have been here for over 200 years, the answer was straightforward.

Then it was my daughter's turn. Her father, she explained, was born in Trinidad into an East Indian family; having lived in Canada for a long, long time, he was Canadian. Her mother was born in Quebec City, a francophone. She herself was born in Montreal.

'Ahh!' the teacher exclaimed brightly, 'So you're from a West Indian family!'

My daughter returned home deeply puzzled. At six years of age she had been, with the best of intentions, handed an identity crisis.

In some ways she was lucky. We were able to sort out her confusions. In other parts of the country - in Toronto or Vancouver - where ethnic identity has become a kind of fetish, my daughter would have had to deal with a far more complex proposal. To be true to her inherited ethnicities, she would be: Franco-Québécoise-FirstNations-Indian-Trinidadian-West Indian-Canadian. Indeed, for her to describe herself as simply 'Canadian' with no qualifying hyphen would be almost antagonistic.

The weight of this hyphen was signalled as far back as 20 years ago by the feminist writer Laura Sabia when she said: 'I was born and bred in this amazing land. I've always considered myself a Canadian, nothing more, nothing less, even though my parents were immigrants from Italy. How come we have all acquired a hyphen? We have allowed ourselves to become divided along the line of ethnic origins, under the pretext of the "Great Mosaic". A dastardly deed has been perpetuated upon Canadians by politicians whose motto is "divide and rule"... I am a Canadian first and foremost. Don't hyphenate me.'

Or, one might add, future generations.

Canadian multiculturalism has emphasized difference. In so doing, it has retarded the integration of immigrants into the Canadian mainstream while damaging Canada's national sense of self. Canada has an enviable record in dealing with racism - our society, while hardly perfect (we too have our racists of all colours), remains largely free of racial conflict. And yet we do ourselves a disservice in pursuing the divisive potential in multiculturalism. With an ongoing battle against separatism in Quebec, with east-west tensions, we are already a country uncomfortably riven. Our 'mosaic' does not help us.

In recognition of its growing unpopularity, official multiculturalism has had its status downgraded from a ministry, to a directorate, to a department. Canada, for the foreseeable future, will continue to be a nation open to immigrants - and one committed to combating racism, sexism and the various other forms of discrimination we share with other societies. Beyond this, because of the damage already inflicted by multiculturalism, we need to focus on programs that seek out and emphasize the experiences, values and dreams we all share as Canadians, whatever our colour, language, religion, ethnicity or historical grievance. And pursue *acceptance* of others - not mere *tolerance* of them.

Whatever policy follows multiculturalism it should support a new vision of Canadianness. A Canada where no-one is alienated with hyphenation. A nation of cultural hybrids, where every individual is unique and every individual is a Canadian, undiluted and undivided. A nation where the following conversation, so familiar - and so enervating - to many of us will no longer take place:

'What nationality are you?'

'Canadian.'

'No, I mean, what nationality are you *really*?'

The ultimate goal must be a cohesive, effective society enlivened by cultural variety; able to define its place in the world. Only in this way might that member of the Ontario legislature and his neighbour no longer see each other as Serb and Croat but as Canadians with a great deal more in common than their politically-sanctioned blindness allows them to perceive.

In the end, immigration is a personal adventure. The process of integration that follows it is a personal struggle within a social context that may make the task either more or less difficult. Multiculturalism in Canada has the latter effect but it may matter very little, because integration - the remaking of the self within a new society with one's personal heritage as invaluable texture - is finally achieved in the depths of one's soul. Many Canadians, like me, have simply ignored multiculturalism, by living our lives as fully engaged with our new society as possible, secure in the knowledge of the rich family past that has brought us here.

I will never forget the bright summer evening many years ago when, fresh off the plane from a trip to Europe, I stood on my apartment balcony gazing out at the Toronto skyline, at the crystal light emanating off Lake Ontario and beyond. I took a deep breath of the cooling evening air and knew, deep within my bones, that it was good to be home.

Neil Bissoondath is a writer of four fictional books plus *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. He is currently working on a new book to be released later this year.

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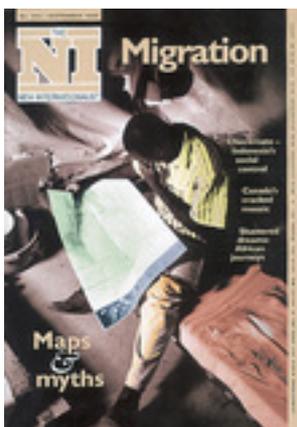
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