

Canada: multiculturalism's broken home

Lydia Perovic

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An immigrant to Canada traces official multiculturalism's origins and finds an idea that is dead from the roots.

The story of an idea called multiculturalism begins in Canada, where the nation's primal divide into Francophone and Anglophone civilisations produced "biculturalism". Canada used bicultural policy to accommodate the "two solitudes" of its colonial provenance in order to, among other things, abate the rising power of *Québecitude* and Québec's independence movement. When the indigenous "first nations" (Inuit, Innu, Cree, Iroquois, and other groups) and immigrants challenged the implicit assumption that only two cultures required formal recognition within its borders, multiculturalism emerged as a more progressive articulation of the original policy.

The best that can be said about the project is that it failed; the worst that it succeeded beyond expectation. Turning Québec and *Francophonie* into yet another small particularistic culture jockeying for recognition in the sea of a (notionally) ethnically neutral and universal English language did indeed fail. However, the bureaucratisation of differences through which Canadian multiculturalism all too often works has made Québec in relation to the rest of Canada (ROC) not the alternative way of belonging and being in Canada, but a sort of a top-of-the-list, best-funded, highest-priority *particular* culture in our midst.

And ROC or Anglophone Canada somehow keeps managing to survive as a notion of an entity faced with particularities – dealing with them, accommodating them, managing them, without ever conceptually *becoming* one of them. Constituted through a step-by-step unification of the provinces of the British empire – which were in places touched, but not disturbed by the native, Francophone and increasingly "other" ethnic elements brought in from overseas for various economic undertakings – the ROC maintained its indubitable white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant (Wasp) and Celtic substance until the overhaul of immigration regulations in the mid-1970s.

Today it may seem that, after all the years of official multiculturalism, the ROC has softened somewhat, but in fact 'multiculturalism' policy seems to have been a good way to solidify the ROC.

Mechanical multiculturalism

Here is how multiculturalism has worked so far. It starts with the gaze of the benevolent Canadian state that detects and acknowledges an "ethnic group" or a "visible minority". Then the group gets a place on government funding lists – festivals are celebrated, cultural projects subsidised, book-purchasing in municipal libraries reorganised. Since government's

role in funding various religious and first-language schools in Canada has never been as big an issue as in the countries with more republican political traditions, if you have the numbers your own “ethnic” school is likely to become state-subsidised.

For some groups, legal exceptionality may be within reach – of the kind that is sometimes created for the native peoples, to whom group reification and “exotification” are now offered as redress for centuries of assimilation and brutality (as if these intervening centuries have not irreversibly changed native populations and as if it is possible to preserve them in a premodern condition).

That is how Québec has been approached and that is how the Québec sovereigntist movement failed: it let itself be incorporated *on the basis of its difference* into the wider Canadian political system. The more it insisted on distinctness, the more quickly Canada invented ways to bureaucratise it.

Today there is strong sovereigntist party representation in the federal parliament, with MPs collecting salaries and benefits from the federal government. Québécois are also disproportionately represented among the federal government’s employees, which in turn fuels anti-Quebec resentment in the western, Anglophone provinces.

The *Parti Québécois*, the sovereignist provincial level party of Quebec, has moved far from its early decades of energetic dispute over big ideas; it has become a stagnant pro-Nafta organisation with a receding social-democratic pedigree, ruled by men well past their prime (see Jacques Gelin’s *Le Virage à droite des élites politiques québécoise*).

In Québec and the ROC alike, politics has been reduced to wrangling over financial resources. Any other type of contestation that does not fit in the who-gets-how-much frame appears unintelligible. When a newspaper reports (only a couple of years ago) that a republican Québécois civil servant was taken to court because he refused to swear allegiance to the Queen, or that another Québécois detonated a molotov cocktail at a Montreal café to protest the company’s exclusively English store signs, you almost feel relieved. Such cases are becoming fewer and fewer.

It appears that the governing Liberal party, now in its fourth consecutive term and still without a viable electoral opponent in sight, has discovered the magic

way of manipulating Canadian diversity – and Québec. The “sponsorship scandal” that has shaken Canadian political life in the past year has revealed how extensive was the Liberal effort to secure Québec’s position inside Canada after the 1995 sovereignty referendum.

An official report revealed that the federal government planned to endear Canada to Québec through a relentless PR offensive. Canada would be promoted in an advertising campaign designed to create a new “brand” promoted through a series of commercial, cultural or purely ceremonial events. So far so bizarre, but the millions of sponsorship dollars tended to end up in the bank accounts of certain Québec PR companies privately owned by the political friends and donors of the Liberal party.

The either-or-culturalist model

Despite – or more likely because of – all the work in “patriating” Québec, Canada remains not a bilingual but an either-or-lingual country. It is in a state of voluntary and polite cultural apartheid. Anglophonia and Francophonia do not share the same cultural references: they don’t read each other’s books, listen to each other’s

music, watch each other’s public television, or frequent the same places. Even the queer universe of Montreal harbours some unqueer divisions along the national lines, as Elspeth Probyn’s writing about Francophone and Anglophone lesbian bars shows (in her *Outside Belongings*). A great majority of people in either linguistic bloc goes about their life business without giving much thought to the other side. Even in Montreal.

So the real question is: can “multiculturalism” really work if Canada’s original “biculturalism” does not? Biculturalism may be able to survive as officially proclaimed and promoted policy through festivals and sponsorships, but can it really become a lived experience of Canada’s citizens? Can people occupying the space between Halifax and Vancouver think and live in two and then several languages, and thrive on their clashes and concordances? So far it does not seem to be the case, and for Canada there will be no real multi- without genuine bi-

But Canada (or ROC, if you’re looking from Québec) has other things on its mind. It is a state busy with nation-building and in search of closure – for the perfect moment where it can be finally said: “This is *it*,

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this is who Canadians are". There are content requirements for publicly-funded cultural creations, as well as citizenship and residence requirements for their authors, and the talk of Canadian *Kultur* is prominent in public discourse.

At the same time, economic and political dependence on the United States have reached unprecedented levels: more than 80% of Canadian exports go across the southern border. As Andrew Cohen shows in *While Canada Slept: how we lost our place in the world*, the reduction of most Canadian foreign policy concerns to trade in recent decades has entailed a drastic lowering in the Canadian government's international profile. Active foreign policy has been supplanted by a wait-and-see approach, and foreign aid reduced and largely tied to particular company contracts.

Impossible immigrations and the diaspora trap

Canada cherishes its open immigration policy, but on inspection this is revealed as another national myth. In fact, the rules for independent immigrants are such that all but the richest among foreign applicants are excluded. The processing fees are the highest among the richest, G7 countries – they amount to \$2,000-plus, and those who apply outside Canada must own at least \$10,000 as proof of financial "sufficiency". The processing takes at least two years, and if you are living in Canada, transferring from one type of visa to another is made very difficult.

Working legally in Canada as a foreigner is virtually impossible, yet the category "illegal immigrants" rarely surfaces in public debates, and never in the context of a hypothetical future legalisation, or the importance of such people for the country's economy. The *sans-papiers* don't exist as a political category in any form.

In any case, once you have obtained permanent residence status you may discover that social conditions nudge you towards your own ethnic diaspora, reversing the process of deterritorialisation

you sought. You also find that in a new country, you lack the invisible safety-network of relatives, friends, and friends-of-friends who help find decent jobs, diverse experiences, and commonness. All overdeveloped countries are vestigially feudal that way, and Canada is no exception. Political is personal, and public is personal, and poor barbarians who grew up outside the empire feeding on myths of the western world's meritocracy and pining to get in, will learn this as immigrants all too soon. The only network to which they may get some ready access is the one made of their former compatriots.

Mutual solitude

Bharati Mukherjee wrote about the difficult social conditions of immigrant living and her reasons for leaving Canada for the US in her essays on multiculturalism. More often a contrary argument is heard from either side of the border – that Canada managed to develop better race relations within its borders than the US did. In contrast, Mukherjee felt that in Canada she could never escape her group designation and her "visible minority" status. Whether she was "celebrated" on the account of her difference, or discriminated against, she found that the indelible mark she was assigned was too heavy a burden for a free citizen.

These are the challenges facing the two linguistic solitudes within Canada, but very few of these challenges are actually addressed in its national politics, where numb is the word. Thanks to some magic managerial skill by the governing Liberals, immigrants keep delivering themselves to it as voting blocs and rarely consider the more pro-immigration New Democratic Party as an alternative. The sacrosanct notions "bilingualism", "multiculturalism" and a "country of immigrants" have strange careers indeed. If left unquestioned in Canada today, they will just help keep the old governing structures intact.

Lydia Perovic works in publishing and has recently become a permanent resident of Canada after five years in the country. She writes for a daily newspaper and a magazine in her country of origin, Montenegro, as well as the local Halifax monthly, *Wayves*.

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