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Toward Dignifying Diversity

The multiculturalism policy has failed to meet its primary objective – to contribute to a richer life for us all.

This week marks the twentieth anniversary of the federal government's unveiling of the multiculturalism policy. On the morning of October 8th, 1971, Prime Minister Trudeau rose in the House of Commons and announced, "A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends itself to the Government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of Canadians."

If you aren't aware of the anniversary and, frankly, could care less, you probably are in the company of most of the nation. There will be few toasts to multiculturalism this week. In a Canada where only 1 in 4 people say that their cultural heritages are very important to them and just 4% belong to ethnic organizations – a place where the proportion endorsing a melting pot model has jumped from 28% to 40% in the past five years – there's not much enthusiasm for a policy and program that is perceived by many to be perpetuating the cultures of Asian and Black immigrants.

It's an unfortunate situation. Things could have been different. They still need to be different. Multiculturalism was supposed to be a means to enriched living for everyone. Instead, it has become an uninspiring end in itself. To ask Canadians to get excited about multiculturalism is like asking Blue Jay fans to get excited about a national anthem that is not followed by a ballgame. We need to move beyond merely applauding and protecting our raw resource of diversity to converting it into a personal and national asset. The times call, not for an emphasis on diversity per se, but for an emphasis on enhanced living for everybody through diversity.

Lower the red flags: the call to go beyond putting up with each other is anything but an attack on immigration and immigrants. It's high time someone said it loudly: cultural diversity is potentially an invaluable national resource. When a society is comprised of people who have been exposed to a wide array of social structures and lifestyles, ideas and experiences, values and beliefs, the cultural pool from which that society can draw is exponentially enriched. What many people don't realize is that Canada is second only to the United States as the most popular destination of emigrants in modern history. When the newcomers are added to Native, British, and French peoples, the net result is an enviable cultural pool. To subscribe to uniculturalism is not only ethnocentric but masochistic: one's culture is deprived of immeasurable benefits.

Lest anyone needs to be reminded, the trick is to figure out how best to tap diversity, in order that everyone can benefit. Three key elements seem to be involved. First, newcomers need to know that, this side of the law, valued aspects of their old cultures are welcome in the new setting; second, their old setting will not count against them – they will be treated equitably; and third, in the interests of the society as a whole, it is essential that people share their varied cultures with each other. Centrally important to this third feature is interaction. New arrivals and members of the host society have to communicate with one another, reflect and evaluate together, in order that the best features of their cultures can be passed on to everyone.

To the credit of the much-maligned federal government, the policy that was outlined in 1971 included each of these key elements. Its major objectives were (1) to permit Canadians who so desired to retain the valued features of their cultural heritages, (2) to assist all Canadians in overcoming cultural barriers to full participation in life – including language, and (3) to promote creative interaction between all cultural groups in the interest of national unity. People of various cultures and ethnic groups, said the Prime Minister, "will be encouraged to share their cultural expressions and values with other Canadians and so contribute to a richer life for us all."

According to the tabled document, "The Government has made it very clear that it does not plan on aiding individual groups to cut themselves off from the rest of society." On the contrary, the Government would promote "creative encounters and interchange among all Canadian cultural groups." Presumably "all" meant everyone.

In practice, however, the multiculturalism policy has failed to meet its primary objective – to contribute to a richer life for us all. Contrary to the claims of anti-multiculturalism crusaders, however, that's hardly to say that nothing of value has been accomplished.

Let's give credit where credit's due. Over time, the federal multicultural program has known reasonable success in contributing to the first two 1971 objectives of preservation and participation. It has heightened our awareness of cultural diversity and contributed to more just and fair conditions for cultural minorities. In the face of claims of accelerated racism, my research shows that, since the mid-1970s, there has been a decrease in prejudice in all regions of the country. Unfortunately, the 10% of remaining blatant bigots distort the progress picture by receiving a disproportionate amount of publicity. The multiculturalism program needs to be commended rather than axed for helping to raise the awareness of both cultural diversity and the unacceptability of prejudice and discrimination.

The first two objectives of preservation and participation have also continued to receive the endorsement of the federal government. The Multiculturalism Act of 1988 states that the government is committed to a policy "designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians." The twin emphases are further reflected in the four current federal multiculturalism programs.

So far so good. But the critically important third objective of stimulating creative interaction between all groups, so that the national resource of diversity could be tapped, seems to have been virtually forgotten. The result? The multiculturalism program has preserved cultures and enhanced participation. But it has failed to bring Canadians together for the dialogue, reflection, and evaluation that are so essential to producing "a richer life for us all." The national anthem was sung pretty well, but geez, do we need a ballgame.

The social value of our cultural diversity lies in our being able to reflect together on our rich body of ideas and behaviour, so that we can sort out the true from the trivial, the banal from the best. Through such open and dynamic interchange, we can creatively improve the collective quality of life in the country. Such a milieu, where uninhibited expression and thoughtful discernment ideally are encouraged by governments, schools, the media, religious groups, and our other major institutions, is the key to tapping the collective contributions of diversity.

So viewed as a means to enriched living for everyone, the idea of a multicultural society becomes something worth celebrating. Through diversity we all benefit. Natives, French Canadians, and English Canadians are joined by people from all over the world in creating a microcosmic global society. Traditions and ideas are respected, but they are also discussed, examined, and selectively adopted, individually and socially. The end result? An enhanced quality of life.

In beginning and ending with the themes of cultural preservation and equal participation, we have done more than deprive Canadians of the post-anthem game. To stop at the point of encouraging the expression of cultural heritage is to experience a triumph of trivia, where multiculturalism becomes synonymous with food fairs and festivals. One also has to endure rhetorical civic proclamations that acknowledge "the contribution of the multiculturalism community to the community at large." To stop at the point of stressing the importance of tolerance and fairness is to encourage a debilitating preoccupation with discrimination, where everyone is on the lookout for any sign of inappropriate behaviour based on one's race or cultural group. When tolerance becomes our end-in-all, intergroup relations can become extremely unenjoyable. Given the ease with which labels such as "racist" and "bigot" can be assigned, it frequently is not wise to speak up in public, let alone speak with each other.

Stripped of the inclination to interact, we find ourselves in the bizarre position of not being able to extract the best from our diverse culture. What we are left with are the consolation prizes of multicultural days and the ongoing admonition to be tolerant.

The national cultural tragedy is that multiculturalism, instead of stimulating the kind of intergroup interaction that is so essential to the tapping of our diversity, has inadvertently tended to inhibit it. We are a diverse nation, alive with attitudes and feelings and opinions and beliefs. But the multicultural rules decree that we are to respect each other, not be judgmental, and certainly never be critical. Key virtues include silence and suppression. Acceptable content is frequently limited to the right and the trite – the politically correct and the socially innocuous. In only two places do Canadians seem to express what they really think of each other: beyond closed doors and on open-line shows.

We've got to do better. It's time to stop wasting our diversity resource. No, the solution does not lie in abolishing the multiculturalism policy and program. It is important to continue to encourage newcomers – as well as the people who are already here – to enjoy and cultivate those features of their heritages that they cherish. It also is essential that we ensure that people are not kept from participating fully in Canadian life because of their race or nationality.

But we need to do more. We have to make it possible for Canadians of diverse backgrounds to interact with each other – to speak openly about their differences and concerns, to reflect on their values and dreams, to evaluate the merits of their respective ideas and lifestyles.

When we find ways to make that happen, make no mistake about it: our diversity will bring about improvements in our quality of life, economically, interpersonally, and emotionally. We will actually find ourselves worrying less and laughing more. And, oh yes, we will be only too happy to drink a toast to cultural diversity.

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