

## Canada's multiculturalism: A circle, ever edging outwards

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*6 Degrees: Experiments in Pluralism* is an essay series devoted to exploring Canada's emerging identity as an experimental society. The inaugural 6 Degrees "citizen space," presented by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, will take place in Toronto from Sept. 19 to 21.

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Canada is now the only Western democracy in which there is no serious argument among the citizenry or politicians over the importance of immigration. Canadians understand that immigration is not migration. It must be seen as the first step toward citizenship. And the sooner an immigrant becomes a citizen, the better.

The main complaint after the arrival of the first 25,000 Syrian refugees seems to be that more of them should have been *citizen sponsored* because it is harder to settle those who are *government assisted*. So we now need more refugees, but in that first category.

Incidentally, I believe the term should be *citizen sponsored*, not *privately sponsored*. Private implies self-interest or commerce. This is all about citizen engagement.

Seen from outside the country, our attitude toward immigration and citizenship often seems to make Canada an outlier – problematic, a contradiction, sleepwalking to disaster, even unacceptable as a real nation-state .

Over the last month in several European countries, I found that many people, of all backgrounds, educations and beliefs, were quicker than ever to say *Of course, you can believe in these things. You have a big country. You're a new country.*

Neither is true. We aren't big. For the last hundred years most immigrants have gone to a handful of big cities. And we aren't new. As a settler society we are the product of 400 years, most of it spent going through the same economic, political and social dramas as other Western countries. We are the oldest continuous democratic federation in the world – beating Switzerland by a few months. We are the second- or third-oldest continuous democracy of any sort in the world – 168 years without breaking up, without a civil war, a coup, an absolute monarch, a dictator.

Our cities are built where Indigenous peoples prospered for thousands of years. As I pointed out in A

*Fair Country*, back in 2008, First Nations and Métis peoples far outnumbered settlers into the second half of the 19th century. So Canada at its best is very much the product of the long relationship with Indigenous peoples, their approaches and philosophies; and above all, their concepts of inclusion and belonging, which today we would call immigration and citizenship. If the central characteristic of Canada is its complexity, this also is an outcome of our long relationship with Indigenous peoples. In particular we owe a great deal to the example of the Métis Nation, the very model of living complexity.

None of this lessens the reality that, for more than a century as immigrant power grew, the Indigenous-settler relationship was betrayed and great evil was done. But that in turn cannot erase the Indigenous influence on our society. That Indigenous reality is now reasserting itself. The Supreme Court of Canada's decision April 14 that re-establishes Métis and non-status Indian rights is yet another example of this.

Today, repairing the relationship with Indigenous peoples is the single most important test for Canadians. We now seem ready to play our part as their allies, but must remind ourselves every day that central to reconciliation is concrete restitution. Many of us keep coming back to the words of Chief John Kelly – “as the years go by, the circle of the Ojibway gets bigger and bigger. Canadians of all colours and religions are entering that circle. You might feel that you have roots somewhere else, but in reality, you are right here with us.”

When I find myself explaining to Europeans why our system of inclusion and diversity more or less works, I inevitably go back to those non-racial Indigenous ideas which leave space for multiple identities and multiple loyalties, for an idea of belonging which is comfortable with contradictions, which shifts humans from their autocratic role as masters of the universe to one more integrated into the place itself. This is an approach to values which is the opposite of the European-U.S. understanding of the monolithic citizen melted into a pot of national uniqueness.

All of which matters today because Canada is out on the cutting edge, doing things other countries are not. We know that the leaders of the three most powerful European countries have declared multiculturalism a failure. Which I suppose is supposed to mean that Canada is or will be a failure. But we should also know that what they mean by multiculturalism has more or less involved the abandonment of what they inaccurately call migrants into ghettos; that they imagine it involves the breaking up of society into unrelated pods, producing in the worst cases police no-go zones and failed schooling. The author of a recent biography of Tony Blair presents the former British prime minister as preferring “multiculturalism” over the “integration of immigrant communities.” We know this is not at all what multiculturalism is supposed to mean. And our opinion should be worth something since we are seen as the inventors and the experimental centre of the concept.

Our great weakness as Canadians is that we have been lazy when it comes to explaining what our experiment consists in. Our excuse could be that it is, after all, an experiment. That is not good enough. The atmosphere out there in most Western countries is one of tired elites, many of them caught up in burgeoning campaigns of fear. Canadians know all too well how contagious these are. Our last prime minister started down that road, which is one of the reasons he is out of a job. And we know well the confused, divisive atmosphere in the United States – the discourse of walls and

security. The current British Prime Minister believes he must get the immigration levels down. The French Prime Minister has just called for the banning of headscarves on students in universities. Even German Chancellor Angela Merkel, having made a great ethical gesture in 2015 to welcome one million Syrian refugees, now finds that, because Germany does not have an overarching immigration-citizenship policy and structure, it is a nightmare to organize their settlement. The result has been a political backlash. And yet we must admire the risk that Germans have taken and their determination to make it work.

What's more, we must not confuse the massive political and ethical failure of most European governments with the attitudes of large parts of the citizenry. Europe is filled with citizens throwing themselves into the crisis as volunteers. Just as the Macedonians were closing their borders, I was in the transit camp on the Athenian docks in Piraeus. At that point, they were managing a few thousand refugees. The sheds were all well organized and run by amazing volunteers – not NGOs or government. In fact, the Greeks, almost broken by their own crisis, have responded with generosity and care to the refugees' plight, just as many citizens of Calais have stepped in to support refugees in the awful camp outside their city. In southern Italy, in Germany, there are thousands of such stories. And there are thousands of study groups, professors, NGOs, activists doing whatever they can.

But the problem is so profound that the continent is failing and governments are justifying this failure by blaming others. You could call it a massive mismanagement of the end of empires; less the uncontrollable outcome of geographic proximity and more the result of 50 years of hypocrisy when it comes to Mediterranean relationships. The Brexit movement in Britain can only be seen as a deeply romantic desire to return to another era, which itself never existed. I hear serious individuals talking about a need to *recreate* an alliance of the English-speaking peoples, as if we have all been sitting around for 40 years, waiting for Britain to come back to us. The most likely outcome of Britain voting to withdraw from the EU would be Scotland separating in order to stay in Europe. This is one of those do-I-laugh-or-do-I-cry moments.

There is a whispered conviction among many around the continent that the real problem is Islam; that it is not *absorbable* into Judeo-Christian civilization. This is the language which Christians used to use against Jews and Protestants against Catholics and vice versa. This was once the excuse in Canada for excluding Sikhs, Chinese, Japanese. And it was the excuse for trying to destroy Indigenous peoples.

### **Reactive panic – and crisis**

The heart of the crisis lies elsewhere. Every year for seven decades Europe has been taking in large numbers of immigrants from many places. They were called many things – migrants, refugees, guest workers. The delusional assumption was that they would serve their economic purpose or be protected for a while, then go home. They didn't. And European leaders, off the record, knew they wouldn't.

And so, 70 years of lying to themselves has resulted in an immigration civilization profoundly unprepared for immigration. No attempt has been made by the EU or by individual European countries to develop an overarching, proactive immigration policy, with the necessary infrastructure

both at home and in their embassies. In many cases they are doing better than they think, but their idea of themselves hides this success. The result now is a reactive panic; a crisis of drownings, disgraceful camps, human disorder and suffering. And there is still no hint of any desire to create a dignified, balanced immigration policy with citizenship as an essential celebratory part of the whole. It is precisely now, in the midst of the crisis, that they should be developing a positive, holistic approach. If anything, the latest EU-Turkish agreement crosses basic ethical lines and so in the long run will make matters worse.

### **The countdown to citizenship**

Let me go back for a moment to the failure of Canadians to explain ourselves to ourselves, let alone to others. There are real risks involved in this ham-handed mutism and naive triumphalism. What's more, it is unnecessary. The patterns of our immigration and citizenship history, at their best and their worst, are clear.

The idea of a broad government-supported immigration/citizenship policy goes back to the Indigenous welcome. That's how the settlers survived. It was equally central to both the New France settlement strategy and system created for the Loyalist refugees fleeing in the 1780s from the American war against Britain. In February, 1848, the first law passed by the new responsible-government parliament of Canada laid out the beginnings of a modern immigration/citizenship policy. With Confederation in 1867, the government immediately created a department for immigration and citizenship, and sent agents out around the world. Rules guiding the newcomers from immigrant status to citizenship were put in place and, ever since, that process has ranged between three and five years.

By the late 19th century, citizenship ceremonies were growing in popularity. Citizenship was a choice to be celebrated publicly. Since 1900, the annual immigration numbers have ranged between 200,000 and 400,000. In 1995 we set the yearly target at 1 per cent of the population. It usually ends up at around 0.7 per cent – between 250,000 and 300,000. As a point of reference: The one million refugees taken in by Germany last year, had they been shared around the EU, would have represented 0.2 per cent of the population. In many of our embassies, over half the staff looks after immigration. We were able to handle the 25,000 Syrian refugees in a few weeks because we have a large group of public servants expert in immigration, settlement and citizenship. The first thing those refugees received on disembarking in Canada was their permanent-residency status, starting them on the countdown to citizenship.

We all know that these 400 years of policy development were tarnished and regularly knocked off track by multiple insurgencies of racism and exclusion. But each of these was gradually eliminated and the main line re-established.

The philosophical trick in all of this is that immigration and citizenship have always been treated as inseparable steps. Engagement and marriage. This means that each immigrant arrives knowing that she must think of herself as a citizen, because she soon will be a citizen. This is a philosophy which changes radically everyone's attitude toward inclusion and integration. It means that language training is simply part of the package from the beginning, as is the expectation that new Canadians

will get involved in volunteerism and politics – the two keys to an engaged citizenry.

## **A perpetual experiment**

What of the multicultural misunderstanding?

Canadians seem to be moving toward other words – diversity, pluralism, inclusion, interculturalism – as we have sensed a growing confusion elsewhere. But the idea is really not so difficult.

I think of it as rooted in balance – a central Indigenous concept of how societies function. At its best a balance between the place, the group and the individual. You could also describe it as a balanced or positive tension between organized integration and celebrated diversity; a conviction that diversity and fairness are reflections of each other; that this requires a rigorous use of political restraint; an allergy to universal mythologies and ideologies. All of which means that we must be self-confident enough and tough enough to live with the reality of complexity.

This is the opposite of the tired European-U.S. insistence on monolithic identities. The Canadian concept of living in a perpetually incomplete experiment may seem radical to many in the Western world. And yet you could simply see it as a profoundly non-racial approach to civilization – one based on the idea of an inclusive circle that expands and gradually adapts as new people join us.

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