The Fifth Force: Multiculturalism and the English Canadian Identity

By PATRICIA E. ROY

ABSTRACT: Canada officially adopted a policy of multiculturalism in 1971. Since then, immigration patterns have changed. The number of immigrants has increased, and the major source has shifted from Europe to Asia, Africa, and their diasporas. Indeed, a fifth force has emerged. Examples from the 1993 federal election, from conflicts especially in metropolitan Toronto and Vancouver, and the observations of writers on multiculturalism suggest that the laudable ideal of multiculturalism has neither prevented racism nor helped English Canadians establish an identity. English Canadians face a challenge in melding diverse cultures into a unity that all can share.

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English-speaking Canadians have been seeking an identity for so long that it has been suggested that the search itself might be the identity.\(^1\) One popular idea was to describe Canada as a "nation of immigrants"; another was to contrast the American melting pot with a more gentle Canadian mosaic. Unfortunately, the "picturesque and appealing metaphor" of the mosaic was not an accurate description.\(^2\) Then, following the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, the government of Canada adopted a policy of multiculturalism in 1971. Particularly in the last decade or so, immigration patterns have changed. The number of immigrants has increased, and the major source has shifted from Europe to Asia, Africa, and their diasporas. Examples from the 1993 federal election, from cultural conflicts—especially in metropolitan Toronto and Vancouver—and from the observations of writers on multiculturalism suggest that the laudable ideal of multiculturalism has neither prevented racism nor helped English Canadians establish an identity.\(^3\)


3. Doubt about the future of Quebec contributes to the identity problem. The term "English Canadian" also poses problems. It can mean simply Canadians who speak English, the sense used here, or can apply specifically to those with roots in England. The latter are seldom mentioned in a multicultural context.

**OFFICIAL MULTICULTURALISM**

"Multicultural" often serves as a synonym for "ethnic" or "immigrant." Official multiculturalism, however, was a response to the notion of a third force in Canadian society; it was articulated most strongly by the offspring of Ukrainian immigrants who "refined the 'mosaic' concept to stress their integration into Canadian political, economic, and social life while retaining their historical and cultural heritage within a Ukrainian-Canadian collectivity."\(^4\) At the time of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in the 1960s, Ukrainians reminded the federal government that not all Canadians belonged to the first two forces, French and English.\(^5\) Given that some aboriginal peoples now refer to themselves as First Nations, renumbering is in order. Thus a fifth force has emerged. The removal of racial barriers from immigration laws in the 1960s increased the immigration of blacks from the Caribbean and parts of Africa. More numerous today are Asians from China, India, and their diasporas.\(^6\)

Consequently, multiculturalism has evolved over the last two decades and has shifted focus. Whereas it


6. "South Asian" is a collective term for people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, but some South Asians came from Africa (especially Uganda), Fiji, and the West Indies.
once seemed primarily concerned with promoting good feelings among peoples of different cultures or, as cynics claimed, encouraging folk dancing in church basements, it has responded to real problems. “Eliminating racism and racial discrimination” is now a major part of the mandate of the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship.7

When the federal government adopted multiculturalism in 1971, Prime Minister Trudeau explained that it “should break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies.” He emphasized that “national unity if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense must be founded on confidence in one’s own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others.”8 Unfortunately, efforts to create confidence in individual identities seem to have weakened the national identity.

Multiculturalism may have made Canada “a cult of minorities.”9 Len Peterson of the Vancouver Sun brilliantly conveyed this concept with a cartoon showing stereotypical Canadians: a Québécois, a Native Indian, and a “Multi-Ethnic-Multi-Cultural-Multi-Racial-Multi-Hyphenated-Canadian.” When the fourth, a wimpish figure, identified himself as only a Canadian, Prime Minister Mulroney accused him of being too negative.10

Sociologist Reginald Bibby claims that by encouraging hyphenation and diversity, multiculturalism has created “mosaic madness.”11 Others have argued that, contrary to its supposed goals, multiculturalism encourages assimilation, denies the real socioeconomic needs of minorities, serves only some of their interests, and makes them second-class citizens.12 A more telling critique is that the Multiculturalism Act, though “activist in spirit, [and] magnanimous in accommodation, curiously excludes any ultimate vision of the kind of society that it wishes to create.”13 Indeed, one literary critic has suggested that “Delphic oracles appear to be clearer” than the concepts of “unity in diversity and multiculturalism.”14

A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

Xenophobia was common in early-twentieth-century English Canada


as demonstrated by antipathy to “foreign”—that is, non-British—immigrants, such as Sifton’s pets and Asians. That hostility faded during the quarter century or so after World War II, a time of large-scale immigration, mostly from Western Europe and the United States. In those years, Canadians took pride in their immigration policy. As late as 1991, the Economic Council of Canada reflected this view:

Immigration offers a rare chance for a policy change where everyone can gain. Those already here gain a little more real income, a more excitingly diverse society, and the satisfaction of opening up to others the great opportunities that living in Canada gives. Among those who come, some gain safety from persecution, some gain freedom from want, some gain a secure future for their children, and nearly all become economically better off.

Canadians boasted how postwar immigrants from Europe and, later, from the Caribbean and Asia helped turn a dour “Toronto the good” into a lively, cosmopolitan city. Similarly,

15. Sifton’s pets are the Central and Eastern Europeans recruited by Clifford Sifton, the federal minister in charge of immigration at the turn of the century.
18. Toronto, of course, was never entirely a homogeneous British city and long had a small non-British population. See James Lemon, Toronto since 1918: An Illustrated History (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1985).

new European immigrants brought “renewed vigour” to Winnipeg’s society and culture. In Vancouver, European immigrants provided talent, interest, and financial support to enliven its artistic life. Indeed, in an essay celebrating the first decade of multiculturalism, the philosopher Lionel Rubinoff suggested that Canadians might find an “authentic nationalism... in the experience of celebrating and deriving joy from the encounter with diversification which epitomizes the character of Canadian existence.”

Even a recent economic report critical of immigration policy admitted that “Canadians’ willingness to enrich their society by absorbing a steady flow of newcomers of various backgrounds is fundamental to the Canadian national character.”

About a woman, Eleni, anyone who questioned her "'about the book [stressed] the fact that Eleni is Greek and [asked] about [Vlassie's] particular background.'" Even more telling is the observation of Myrna Kostash that the entry under her name in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* refers the reader to Ukrainian writing. She rightly wondered what she had to do to be considered a Canadian writer.

Perhaps official multiculturalism has been too successful. In introducing Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions, an anthology of short stories and interviews designed to introduce both Canadian-born and immigrant multicultural writers to a wider audience, Linda Hutcheon remarks how many stories and interviews revealed "worries about stereotyping, about fossilizing cultures into unchanging folk memories, about reducing 'otherness' to singing and dancing or exotic food, about relegating non-Anglo and non-French to the margins of Canadian culture where they are prey to tokenism as much as to ghettoizing."

Many writers try to maintain elements of their own culture, tradition, and customs while reminding other...


Canadians that “‘the Canadian imagination is [not] the sole property of liberated Ontario W.A.S.P.s and lacerated Quebec Catholics. It is nourished on papayas as well as on Red River cereal.’” Similarly, Frank Birbalsingh observed that while “South Asian Canadian writers from Africa and the Caribbean” gradually take “on Canadian subjects in their work, . . . the citizenship of their characters is less full-fledged than promised, partly because of their own reluctance to give up the cultural baggage they have brought to Canada, and partly because of the hostility or inhospitality they encounter here.”

Within the arts community, some visible minorities—a term that offends some—frustrated by having to look in from the outside and resentful of arts organizations that respond to criticisms of Eurocentrism by tokenism or appropriating culture, have created their own intellectual ghettos. An example is the “Writing thru Race” conference in the summer of 1994. Sponsored by the Racial Minority Writers’ Committee of the Writers’ Union of Canada and partly funded by such public agencies as the Canada Council, it allowed only “First Nations writers and writers of color” to attend. Replying to criticism of this segregation, Roy Miki, the conference coordinator and a Canadian-born Japanese, argued that people of color or nonwhites, linked by such experiences as language, history, and racism, had produced some of the most original and culturally significant works in Canadian literature.

While some writers feel ghettoized, other immigrants are, as the literary critic William New phrased it, modifying and encouraging the mainstream “along braided channels.” Indeed, Canadian Literature, the journal he edits, has helped bring such writers into the mainstream with special issues featuring essays and poetry about Italian, Slavic and East European, and East Asian writing. Of course, some writers transcend ethnic categories. The Sri Lankan-born Michael Ondaatje, who

35. For example, Richard Fung, “Working through Cultural Appropriation,” Fuse, 16:16-24 (Summer 1993); Marlene Nourbese Philip, “The New Jerusalem in Two and a Half Minutes,” ibid., 14:20-23 (Spring 1991). In Vancouver, when the appearance of “Hongcouver” T-shirts in the fall of 1988 indicated rising racial tensions, the arts community began including Asians on boards of directors, inviting Asian Canadian dramatists to mount plays on their stages, and advertising productions in the Chinese- and Japanese-language press. While racial tensions have not disappeared, there does not seem to be the same resentment that has appeared in Toronto. Liam Lacey, “Soul-Searching in ‘Hong-couver,’” Globe and Mail (Toronto), 6 July 1991; Chris Dafoe, “Changing Cultural Definitions,” ibid., 24 June 1993.
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came to Canada in 1962 at age 19, is a leading example. He has won the Governor General's Award for poetry, and his novel *The English Patient* won the 1992 Booker Prize for the best novel published in the United Kingdom by a citizen of a British Commonwealth nation, Ireland, or South Africa. Because Ondaatje seeks "to discover as many aspects of [himself] and the world around [him] as [he] can," he has written on such diverse subjects as colonial Ceylon, Toronto in the 1930s, and Billy the Kid. Not all immigrant writers approve; some suggest that writers such as Ondaatje have achieved fame because they conform to the majority culture. Nevertheless, as Michael Thorpe has argued, immigrant writers have made a "vital contribution to the internationalization of English Canadian literature," while Third World immigrants, in particular, have challenged "Eurocentric Canadian nationalism." He suggests that recognizing that "Canadian literature is irrevocably international in content and concern" may alert readers both to "diverse cultural riches" and to "real and potential divisive cultural differences."  


**POLITICAL CULTURE**

Cultural differences spill over into the political realm. Although they create sometimes bitter public debate, there is, in the political world, considerable integration. Descendants of continental European immigrants are now so much a part of the political scene that little notice is taken of their ancestry. Increasingly, visible minorities participate in the electoral process and get elected, especially in metropolitan Toronto and Vancouver. Some constituencies in greater Vancouver have a significant Asian vote, and there is evidence that the fifth force is a factor. Among the five Liberals elected in the area in the 1993 federal election were individuals with roots in Trinidad, Hong Kong, and India. In Winnipeg, a native of the Philippines was reelected, and successful candidates in the Toronto area included immigrants from Grenada and India.

Much of the debate over immigration in the 1993 election concerned the number and classes of immigrants to be admitted. The old-line parties favored admitting about 250,000 immigrants per year, or approximately 1 percent of the population. The Reform Party, a new group with strength in the western provinces and rural Ontario, proposed a cut to 150,000, the abolition of the


Department of Multiculturalism, and a policy to ensure that immigrants "possess the human capital necessary to adjust quickly and independently to the needs of Canadian society and the job market." Despite suggestions that this is a code for a racist immigration policy, the party claims to oppose "any immigration policy based on race or creed.

The debate, unfortunately, had racist manifestations. Some Reformers vigorously opposed nonwhite immigration and presented arguments reminiscent of fears in pre-World War II British Columbia that whites could be "swamped" by hordes of Asian immigrants. William Gairdner, whose book The Trouble with Canada has been popular among them, claims that with current immigration patterns, Canada could be Chinese within 250 years. Indeed, Raymond Chan, the newly elected federal minister for the Asia Pacific Rim and himself an immigrant from Hong Kong, has rued the fact that it is possible for Chinese speakers to "survive and prosper" in greater Vancouver without speaking any English.

43. Reform would allow individuals or groups "to preserve their cultural heritage using their own resources."
46. Reform Party of Canada, Blue Sheet.
50. Non-Chinese complain that they cannot read the unilingual Chinese signs in some suburban shopping malls.

RACISM

The reappearance of racism in a country that prides itself in being "a nation of immigrants" and whose government officially proclaims multiculturalism partly reflects current economic instability. Regrettably, it also mirrors a long-term problem, the lack of a secure sense of self-identity among English Canadians, a feeling that Canada as they know it is changing as a result of the immigration of the fifth force.

Recent public opinion polls suggest racism may be rising. A study of 64 polls between 1975 and 1989 cautiously concluded that there has been "increasing tolerance over time." Similarly, an October 1991 poll revealed that 63 percent of the population thought the presence of people of different races made Canada a better country. However, a February 1994 poll found 53 percent of Canadians questioning immigration levels, whereas a similar poll five years earlier had indicated that only 31 percent felt that way. Other polls seem

to confirm the racism. A 1985 survey revealed “a disturbing level of racism among Canadians—primarily in Montreal, Edmonton, and Vancouver—based on fear that Canada’s predominantly Anglo-Saxon and European culture would be swallowed up by increased immigration from Third World countries.”\(^{54}\) Paralleling that result was an October 1993 poll that indicated that 72 percent of Canadians favored abandoning multiculturalism and requiring immigrants to adopt “Canada’s values and way of life.”\(^{55}\) There is, indeed, ample anecdotal evidence to support a February 1994 finding that uncertainty about the future of a vaguely defined Canadian culture was becoming more important than economic factors in shaping attitudes to immigration.\(^{56}\)

Yet economic factors play a role. Wealthy, well-educated Asian immigrants are blamed for driving up real estate prices in the Vancouver area, building “monster” or “mega” houses that block the neighbors’ light or view, cutting down shade trees, and changing street addresses to “lucky” numbers. Caucasians’ comments about physical changes in neighborhoods undoubtedly reflect insecurity about the future of the society they know.\(^{57}\) So, too, does the response to the 1990 decision of the Royal Cana-

dian Mounted Police to allow baptized Sikhs to wear turbans rather than uniform headgear.\(^{58}\) That brought out blatant racism, especially in Alberta, where it is said that people bought 30,000 pins (made in Taiwan) with the slogan “Who’s the minority in Canada?” and a drawing of a turbaned Sikh, a Chinese man, and a spear-carrying black, dwarfing a white man holding a Canadian flag.\(^{59}\) In commenting on such events, Neil Bissoondath, a Trinidadian-born novelist, wisely observed, “We are not a country of ancient customs and multiculturalism seems to have taught us that tradition does not admit change: that traditions, in Canada, turn precious and immutable.”\(^{60}\)

Insecurity may also explain why some Toronto blacks call for all-black or Afrocentric schools.\(^{61}\) Similarly, concerns about racial stereotypes partly explain protests over an exhibition of African artifacts held by the Royal Ontario Museum in 1989 and a production of the musical Show Boat in 1993. Within the black community, not everyone favors segre-

56. Campbell, “Too Many Immigrants.”
58. In Oct. 1993, British Columbia announced that baptized Sikh members of municipal police forces may wear turbans and carry kirpans (ceremonial daggers).
59. The Reform Party dropped references to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police dress code in its 1991 platform statement. The turban was again controversial when the Canadian Legion in Newton, B.C., a Vancouver suburb, invited Sikh veterans to march in a Remembrance Day ceremony in Nov. 1993 but refused to allow anyone wearing headgear to attend the reception that followed in the Legion Hall.
gated schools, and some affirm that objections to the museum exhibition or Show Boat rest on misinterpretations. The black community also has many strands. Somalis, for example, find that Afro-American groups do not consider them sufficiently black for membership.62

Whites also hold stereotypical views. They tend to blame immigrants for increased rates of crime whether the immigrants in question are black youths in Toronto or Asian gangs in Vancouver.63 On the other hand, some minorities accuse the police of racism.64 In Toronto, for example, there have been well-publicized incidents of police shooting black youths suspected of fleeing from the scene of a crime. One incident occurred two days before a Los Angeles jury acquitted Rodney King. Thus there was unusual tension when black activists organized a protest rally outside the U.S. consulate in Toronto. The demonstration soon degenerated into a riot marked by window smashing, vandalism, and looting. Although not all rioters were black and unemployment was a grievance, some observers suggested racism underlay it.65 In explaining the riot, Cecil Foster, a writer from Barbados, asserted that many blacks felt betrayed and were “willing to try to destroy” Western society. While he advised fellow blacks to teach their children “how to live in a racist society,” he admonished that mainstream society must “let blacks feel that [they] belong, that there’s a place for [them] in the schools, in politics, the arts, and most importantly, the work force. Simply put, that [they] are Canadians and equal.”

CONCLUSION

While taking pride in identifying Canada as a nation of immigrants, Canadians have paradoxically denied themselves a clear identity, although census takers have discovered that “Canadian” is emerging as a significant ethnic identity.67 Yet, until more Canadians can decide who they are—a matter incredibly complicated by the French and English solitudes (Quebec and English Canada)—some Canadians will have difficulty in coping with immigrant cultures. Canadians, not all of whom are secure or prosperous, are susceptible to what William Gairdner described as a fear “of losing their connection with the familiar.”68 Hostile reactions to immigrants, especially from unfamiliar non-European sources, in turn, create worrisome resentment among the new immigrants. But neither among older nor newer Canadians is there a consensus on the value of multiculturalism.

Racism has revived. Yet political leaders have quickly dissociated


themselves from racist actions; laws prohibit them; and editors condemn them. Moreover, the participation of the fifth force in the political and cultural community and the persistence of the concept that “we are all immigrants” leaves hope that good sense and tolerance may prevail on the parts of both longtime Canadians and more recent immigrants. If Canadians can listen to new creative voices and “distill their experiences of Canada through a variety of rich cultural heritages,” they may yet devise a distinct, diverse, and vibrant culture that will be their common identity. Certainly that is the hope of Heritage Minister Michel Dupuy, who told Parliament that Canada should “promote the development of a wholly Canadian identity as a rallying point for diverse cultures,” but he admitted it would be a challenge “to integrate diverse cultures with our existing cultures without melting them down into a single mould, thereby assimilating them out of existence.” Meeting the challenge of reinventing the mosaic will not be an easy task. Failing to try may lead to disaster, while success may restore a national pride in which all Canadians can share.