In Praise of Canadian Contradictions: Making Our Way in

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Every time I go out for dinner to a Chinese Restaurant, I am surprised at the number of people of all backgrounds who have mastered the use of chopsticks. If the talented use of chopsticks is one measure against which to gauge Canadians’ readiness for membership in the global village, then I would say we are certainly well prepared! More seriously, the fact that Canadians are well prepared for the challenges ahead is because, as a society, we have been adapting to many of the key features of globalization for a much longer time than other countries.

If we agree that some of the elements defining globalization include the large-scale movement of people and the bloom in diversity that follows, the Americanization of culture, increasing economic integration, and fewer absolutes and homogeneity, then Canada was arguably the first country to ‘go global’. Canadians thus have had a head start in thinking about how to cope with what these trends mean for our culture and society. This realization process has taught Canadians to live with apparent paradoxes that would rankle other peoples looking for clear and more straightforward answers. One Canadian invention that most interests the world – our multiculturalism policy – is a great example of a classic Canadian contradiction: while extolling the benefits of diversity and pluralism, Canada works as one of the world’s most successful integrators of immigrants.

CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION AND HOMOGENIZATION

Many of the cultural items that we associate with globalization started out as American cultural products, for example, McDonalds’ hamburgers, Jeans, Coca-Cola, and Rock-and-Roll. Canada, next-door neighbour to the United States, was the first country to be subjected to this onslaught early in the 20th century, as American cultural and economic influence grew. As a result, Canadians have grown up taking America’s dominance for granted, and this dominance is one of the reasons for the confused and weak sense of identity that Canadians have often felt. This Americanization is now spreading throughout the globe as a driving force of globalization, but in Canada this trend is no longer perceived as negatively – or even as consciously – as in other countries.

In fact, the cultural similarities Canadians (especially English-speaking Canadians) share with the United States has been one of the grounds of mainstream Canadian cultural success. Alanis Morissette, Avril Lavigne, and Jim Carrey are often mistaken as Americans unless a proud Canuck pipes up pointing out the mistake. Popular Canadian cultural production has, for some time, ‘piggy-backed’ on the American form and has enjoyed considerable success doing so. This is not to say that a more uniquely Canadian culture has not achieved world renown on its own merit. In the field of literature, Canadians have quietly asserted themselves as some of the best contemporary writers in the English and French languages. Canadian writers took half of the nominations and eventually the prestigious Booker Prize in 2002, as Yann Martel beat out Rohinton Mistry and Carol Shields. Mistry, a former Booker Prize winner for A Fine Balance, is an excellent example of modern Canadian writing. Mistry sets most of his writing in the India of the 1970s, but admits the influence Canada has had in forming his view of the world. Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Anne Hebert, Alice Munro, and Michel Tremblay round out the well-respected stable of writers Canada has produced. In another interesting cultural development, second-generation Canadians are getting into the act in the movie and music industries, as they return to their parents’ lands of origin, and often bring with them a unique perspective or talent as result of the Canadian mix. A great example of this new and exciting trend can be seen in Deepa Mehta’s Bollywood/Hollywood that stars Canadian Lisa Ray, who has become a huge name in Indian film.

Another aspect of globalization has been increasing political and economic integration, especially within geographic regions. The United States has long dominated Canada’s economy, an influence that only increased after the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Canadians worried that these agreements would put our culture and our distinct way of life under threat. Surprisingly, Canadian culture and values have continued to strengthen even as economic integration has proceeded apace. Take, for example, the recent developments...
in the area of gay rights and same-sex marriage. This is an issue that has garnered a lot of attention around the world; although a number of countries have legalized same-sex civil unions, no other country has come as close as Canada to legalizing full and equal marriage for gays and lesbians. Of course, there has been significant debate among Canadians, and the country still appears split on the issue, but the tone and content of the debate has been strikingly different from that in the United States. In Canada, respect for equality is the key issue in the debate, which is carried out, for the most part, in a civil fashion.

The issue of gay marriage was placed on the political agenda as a direct result of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which has led the courts to bring down a number of landmark decisions in the field of equality rights in the last decade. While some Canadians may disagree with the court on this specific issue, they continue to overwhelmingly support the equality guarantees and the Charter, twenty years after its adoption. This is one of the reasons for Canada’s reputation around the world as a country that respects rights.

On other issues, such as the decriminalizing of the possession of marijuana or Canada’s refusal to join the war in Iraq, the differences with American policy have been significant, and have brought Canada attention in the world press for something other than ice storms. As we continue down this path, we are seen to have values more consistent with Scandinavian countries than with the United States, and we begin to gain international respect as a moderate and ‘civilized’ society. These values are also evident in how we view ourselves and what issues concern us in the world.

Canadians generally understand that they live securely with a level of material wealth that remains only a dream for the majority of the world. Knowing that we live well informs Canadians’ concern for the problems we see in the world; this is reflected in the Canadian government’s involvement in humanitarian activities with landmines, AIDS, and peacekeeping operations. The 2002 Pew Global Attitude Survey interviewed over 30,000 people from around the world and revealed that Canadians exhibited the lowest levels of concern about crime and ethnic unrest, and that Canada was the only country in the West where the majority of the population (56%) expressed satisfaction with the state of their country. In the same survey, Canadians identified spreading ethnic hatred in the world and the degradation of the environment as the greatest dangers to the world.

**BILINGUALISM, MULTICULTURALISM AND IMMIGRATION**

A major question facing many countries in an increasingly globalized world is how to ensure social harmony in societies with large immigrant populations. Canada’s steps toward linguistic and ethnic harmony have attracted the attention of people from around the world. Our relative success in this area influenced the multiculturalism policies introduced in both the United Kingdom and Australia.

The long-running dialogue between English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians has taught us a lot about having a healthy respect for compromise and the importance of negotiation to bring about the resolution of conflict. The relatively successful affirmation of Canada as a cultural and linguistic duality is unique in a world where countries usually insist on stressing commonalities. At the same time as Canadians were wrestling with the questions of national unity and a bi-cultural nation, the increasing diversity of the population as a result of immigration raised challenges of its own that led to a national policy of official multiculturalism. Why has Canada, almost alone among developed countries, evolved as a successful multicultural society?
First, the kind of immigration that Canada accepts does a lot to stack the deck in favour of easier integration. Immigration policy places emphasis on English or French-speaking ability, educational level, and work history; this emphasis means that the best and brightest of many countries become a part of our immigrant stream. Often better educated than native-born Canadians and highly motivated to succeed, many immigrants come with a keen interest in becoming active and productive members of Canadian society. The second reason for Canadian success is classically Canadian. Official multiculturalism encourages Canadians of non-French, non-English background to nurture and celebrate their heritage as an important part of the Canadian mosaic. Paradoxically, this policy, designed to nurture and maintain difference, has worked to more deeply and quickly integrate newcomers. In many European countries, where assimilation is strongly encouraged, the opposite occurs, as newcomers feel that they are not fully respected or treated as equals. Immigrants respond by holding on to their culture and language and by passing it on to their children as a defensive measure against assimilation. In less open and flexible societies, like France and Germany, few citizens have adopted the viewpoint that an African or Asian immigrant could be ‘French’ or ‘German’. This pressure to assimilate, coupled with an unwelcoming attitude, can quickly turn enthusiasm to bitterness. Friends who were immigrants in Europe and have now settled in Canada underwent an interesting transformation after they arrived. Told that they should hold onto their culture, they slowly let it slip as they grew into their new country. They excuse the fact that their children do not speak their parents’ language or follow the culture of their home country, because “Canada is now their home.” The openness in Canada stems from the value Canadians place on diversity, choosing to see it as positive feature of their culture. The large proportion of the population that is either foreign-born (17%) or children of immigrants means that most Canadians come into daily contact with others from a different background. In this, Canadians are lucky; day-to-day living becomes a big classroom where the topic is world culture. There are few other countries that can match the size and scope of population diversity that we find in Canada. For most Canadians, the lack of respect shown to diversity and minority communities around the world is unsettling. The French government’s decision late in 2003 to ban the hijab and other ‘ostentatious’ religious symbols from public schools illustrates a divergent approach to diversity. The ban received worldwide condemnation for its disregard of the rights of minority French and for the discord it would likely sow. In confronting a similar issue over a decade ago, the Canadian government took a different approach when it decided that support for diversity was the most important consideration and changed the regulations to allow for Sikh Canadians to wear a turban when serving in the RCMP. However, as Canadians we cannot afford to rest on our growing international reputation as a diverse and tolerant society. We need to remain vigilant and committed to the values of equality and opportunity. It is relatively easy to make multiculturalism a fact on the nightly newscast and in the Governor General’s office. But, after winning over immigrants’ minds and souls, does our society deliver on its promises of a better life? There remain real challenges in closing the income gaps between Canadian-born and immigrant workers in the labour market, and in recent years there has been an increasing concentration of immigrant and minority Canadians in poorer neighbourhoods.
THE BENEFITS OF LIVING WITH CONTRADICTIONS

I believe that the fact that Canadians must continually pose the questions, “Who is a Canadian?” and “What is Canadian culture?” has helped to create a more harmonious society. Canadians have a love for their country, but have not been able to point as easily as the Americans to the symbols that represent it, such as apple pie, the Statue of Liberty, or the Declaration of Independence. This mild confusion about Canadian identity and national symbols is not at all a bad thing, in my view. It allows for a greater openness and flexibility about what it really means to be Canadian and leads to such things as the acceptance of turbans into the RCMP.

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The national unity debate has also contributed to Canadians’ innate understanding of the importance of compromise and living with seemingly irresolvable contradictions. How else can we make sense of a Constitution, the supreme law of the land, with a “Notwithstanding Clause”? Or of the new Minister of Canadian Heritage Hélène Scherrer, who describes herself as "very, very federalistic" towards Canada, but also "very, very nationalistic" towards Quebec? I think these ostensibly contradictory positions mean that Canadians understand duality well.

In a world where absolutes are a very rare commodity and people kill to enforce homogeneity, learning to live with the contradictory strikes me as a very sane approach to running a country. Coincidentally, this is also a necessary quality for successful interaction in a global society, as the world increasingly becomes an amalgam of different cultures and ideas. As our national identity strengthens, I hope that the secret ingredient of Canadian diversity and success is not lost. As it becomes clearer what a Canadian is, it may also become clearer who does not belong in the group. Will the Canada of the future be as open to difference, and will the word ‘un-Canadian’ continue to be the oxymoron it is today? I dearly hope so.


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