

THE CHALLENGE OF DIVERSITY IN CANADA AND QUEBEC

Micheline Labelle

Over the 1970s and 1980s, Canada and Quebec used several judicial, institutional and political mechanisms for promoting diversity and combating discrimination. Micheline Labelle, a specialist in immigration and citizenship issues, surveys the way they accommodated the various manifestations of diversity, and the challenges that still confront them in terms of inequalities and the integration of new immigrants, especially the issue of recognition of degrees, and the financing of and access to settlement services and representation in the public sphere. She also focuses on the evolution of the political climate in Canada and elsewhere: the openness observed in the 1980s was followed by a conservative political climate during the following decade, a trend that was amplified by the post-September 11 international context, she notes.

“The world is among us, within us and with us. It is no longer possible to see it as some distant notion, exotic or episodic, to keep it in a relationship of subordination or domination. It is there, the whole and its parts inseparable.”

Edwy Plenel, *La découverte du monde*, 2002.

In the wake of the social protests that punctuated the 1970s and 1980s, Western societies have at last acknowledged the ethnic and national diversity of their populations by openly debating it. Up to that point, intercultural relationships had been subjected to an ideology of assimilation and marked by prejudice and discrimination, even by state violence. One need only recall that native peoples were forbidden to use their languages, rituals and cultural practices, and that official racism was a bedrock of the immigration policies of both the United States and Canada. These policies were based on preferential selection criteria such as nationality, country of origin, ethnic group, geographical area or the inability to adapt to a different climate etc. The principle of forced assimilation was inseparable from ideologies of universalism, racism and sexism, which were constitutive elements of the geoculture of the world system, as Immanuel Wallerstein has shown.

Various factors have contributed to progress in the recognition of ethno-cultural and national diversity: a renewed commitment to human rights, more rigorous notions of social justice and formal equality, the protection of minority rights and of the rights of peoples, etc. Ethnic and national identities are no longer seen as primordial, inherited, traditional or tribal characteristics that must be shed if one is to become modern and rational. They are now seen as a basis for mobilization, for

political action and renewal, inspired by “resistance identities” or “project identities” and focused on the promotion of the rights and dignity of individuals and communities.

In North America, the demands of native peoples and the new social movements (feminism, the Afro-American movement, a renewed interest in ethnic identity), along with the globalization of migratory flows, have created the need for new approaches to the management of diversity in the public sphere (employment equity policies, reasonable accommodation, intercultural training, etc.). This has forced a respect for those demands and challenged in part the dominant, triumphalist and scornful discourse that dismissed them as “sectional.”

This openness has been met by opposite trends. Economically, politically and culturally, the impact of globalization is ambiguous. Globalization contributes to the development of cosmopolitan horizons, broadens democracy and diversifies citizenship. At the same time it is accompanied by neo-liberal regulation, structural adjustment policies and the privatization of public resources, resulting in the “racialization” of poverty (UNESCO) and in violations of social, economic and cultural rights on a global scale.

The 1990s and early years of the 21st century have witnessed new developments — namely, the return of right-wing conservatism, an emphasis on law and order, appeals to social cohesion and concerns about national security. There has been a backlash against the demands of social and nationalist movements and native peoples, which are seen as encouraging social and political fragmentation. Multiculturalism as a societal project (and not

just as a demographic fact or a public policy) is perceived as problematic: the communitarian model is seen as a threat. Western countries are seeking to redefine the notion of citizenship.

In the area of immigration, experts have noted a number of common trends in Western societies: an increase in the number of illegal immigrants and political asylum claimants, a shift in the sources of immigration from the south to the north, a harden-

Canada is a multi-ethnic and multinational society. In the 2001 census, people of native ancestry accounted for 3.3 percent of the total population, compared with 2.8 percent five years earlier. The share of people born outside Canada was 18.4 percent, with “visible minorities” making up 13.4 percent of the total, compared with 4.7 percent in 1981. That proportion is expected to rise to 20 percent by 2016.

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ing of immigration policies, a focus on highly skilled workers for the high-tech sector, international harmonization and overriding concern about security and national unity.

The political crisis created by the events of September 11 has led to a new profiling of the enemy, both within and without, to the reinforcement of a harmful and reductive discourse on the clash of civilizations, and to simplistic dichotomies being drawn (between traditional and modern, between feudalism and civilization, etc.). The neo-racist ideology and discourse, arguing on the basis of putatively irreconcilable and incompatible differences between cultures, now assumes a variety of forms and is aimed at a variety of targets, depending on national contexts. The reappearance and subcontracting of torture has become an object of great concern.

This *air du temps* is also manifest in Canada, but it is compounded by the issue of Canadian unity, which has been challenged by the self-determination demands of First Nations and of Quebec.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Canada used a range of major legal, institutional and political mechanisms to promote diversity and combat discrimination, including official bilingualism and multicultural policies, the entrenchment of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms into the 1982 Constitution, employment equity programs, the ratification of international treaties and the fight against racism.

This inclusive approach was followed or accompanied by a period of conservation over the following decade, a trend that was amplified by the new international environment of the early 21st century and that met with growing resistance within civil society.

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Thus the new *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (2002) emphasizes the need to protect the security of Canadian society and respect for our values and norms in the area of social responsibility, and several other recent initiatives are focused on the harmonization of Canadian security policies with those of the United States. One of those measures — the *Anti-Terrorism Act* (Bill C-36), adopted in December 2001 — has been an issue of concern for organizations promoting rights and freedoms and for some political organizations (e.g., the Canadian Bar Association, the Canadian Council for Refugees, the Canadian Arab Federation, the Council of Canadians, the Civil Liberties Union, the Bloc Québécois, and the NDP). At the same time, the proposed *Citizenship Act* seeks to upgrade the Canadian passport and includes a new section devoted to the notion of loyalty to Canada. Broadly speaking, the goals of multiculturalism policy now reach beyond diversity and include, more than ever before, the reinforcement of Canadian identity, social justice and participation in civic affairs.

Since the close call of the 1995 referendum, particular effort has been devoted to containing the ultimate expression of national diversity — namely, Quebec’s self-determination demands. That effort has led to the adoption of a variety of measures, such as the distribution of Canadian flags, the Canada Millennium Scholarships, the Canada Research Chairs Program, national standards and the sponsorship program.

In a 2003 survey conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada, *The Globe and Mail* and the Canadian Opinion Research Archive, 54 percent of respondents stated that multiculturalism makes them very proud of being Canadian. However, there was still a significant degree of ambiguity

associated with the term “multiculturalism.” Did it refer to Canada’s diverse population? To the federal multiculturalism policy? To the philosophical and political goal of achieving a more diverse body of citizens? The authors concluded rather hastily that the survey results enlightened the debate on Canada’s multiculturalism policy and supported Will Kymlicka’s point of view in his dispute with Neil Bissoondath and Richard Gwyn, who claimed that multiculturalism had led to the creation of self-contained ghettos. The authors noted, however, that accommodating diversity did not mean that discrimination and racism had disappeared.

Indeed, social attitudes and practices are not necessarily the same, and it is important to make a clear distinction between them.

For example, it is well known that native peoples, racialized minorities and recent immigrants continue to be disadvantaged in Canadian society. These disadvantages are structural and call for government action. The economic marginalization of native peoples persists, with native men earning 21 percent less than non-native men, while native women earn 14 percent less than non-native women. The unemployment rate of immigrants is higher than that of Canadian-born workers — 12.7 percent vs. 7.4 percent, representing a substantial deterioration compared to the situation in 1981 (when they were 7 percent and 7.1 percent, respectively). Recently in *Le Devoir*, Geneviève Bouchard noted that the wages of recent immigrants are equal to only 77 percent of those of Canadian-born workers — a drop of approximately 10 percent since 1981.

Despite education levels that are comparable to those of the population as a whole, Afro-Canadians have higher unemployment rates, lower average incomes and higher poverty rates; they

suffer from wage gaps caused by discrimination in hiring and promotion, and they are under-represented in the federal civil service and in Parliament.

Statistics Canada’s *Ethnic Diversity Survey* (2003) reveals that one in five people belonging to a “visible minority” reported having been discriminated against or treated unfairly sometimes or often. “Race” and skin colour were the reasons for discrimination or unfair treatment that were cited most often; discrimination or unfair treatment was most likely to occur in the workplace.

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have been particular targets of racism in Canadian society since September 11, 2001, according to the 2004 report of Doudou Diène, the UN’s special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. The report recommends the establishment of a national program and a national commission to combat racism, as well as specific measures of reparation for Chinese-Canadian citizens who were subjected to the discriminatory head tax or for their family members. The report, which also refers to the situa-

tion of displaced persons in Africville, Nova Scotia, makes it clear that Canada has an obligation to redress past injustices.

As a global society and a modern political community aspiring to social justice and to the recognition of its national identity on the international scene, Quebec has also, like the federal government, had to deal with a variety of historical experiences and events and manifestations of diversity within its borders. The 2001 census shows that its population is over 7 million, of whom 9.9 percent were born abroad (18.4 percent in the Montreal metropolitan area).

Over the past three decades, the Quebec government has put into place a number of legal, political and advisory mechanisms aimed at affirming Quebec’s identity as a nation and acknowledging the diversity of its population. These include the charter of the French language (Bill 101), which confirms the dominance of the French language in the public arena, and a legal framework aimed at fighting discrimination, promoting equality and guaranteeing cultural rights (e.g., the endorsement of international human rights treaties, the adoption of the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1975, a statement on interethnic and interracial relations, etc.). Other measures include employment equity and cultural sensitivity training programs, adjustments in the public service, reasonable accommodation measures and involvement in international solidarity actions. The Quebec government also negotiated with Ottawa to obtain a degree of control in the selection of independent immigrants and in settlement services. The federal government retains full authority in matters regarding refugees and sponsored immigrants, and is responsible for setting national standards and targets,

deciding on eligibility and granting citizenship.

While there are a number of similarities with the federal multiculturalism policy, in particular with regard to respecting pluralism, emphasizing social justice and encouraging citizens of all origins to take part in public affairs, Quebec policies differ with respect to the interpretation of what constitutes the Quebec political community.

In its first action plan, adopted in 1981 — *Autant de façons d'être Québécois. Plan d'action à l'intention des communautés culturelles* — the Quebec government proposed a policy of cultural convergence, in which the peo-

ple of Quebec were described as forming a nation and French culture was seen as the focus towards which other cultures would converge. In 1990, the Liberal government advanced the notion of a moral contract between immigrants and the host society, along with the notion of a common public culture (*Au Québec, pour bâtir ensemble*). These notions became the main reference points in the Quebec discourse on integration and interculturalism. With equal rights and obligations, citizens were asked to endorse a common public culture despite their differences. This common culture was based on principles of democracy, secularism, French as the only official

language, peaceful conflict resolution, pluralism, respect for the cultural heritage and the equality of men and women.

The election of the Parti Québécois in 1994 and the referendum on Quebec sovereignty in 1995 led to a shift toward the notion of citizenship. A new government department (the *Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration*, established in 1996) promoted the notions of a common civic framework and civic participation, the exercise of rights and responsibilities, solidarity and zero exclusion. This transition from the cultural to the political was noteworthy. From the point of view of Quebec as a state,



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A citizenship ceremony in Toronto in July 2000. Since September 11, 2001, the loyalty of new citizens to Canada has become matter of public deliberation, writes Micheline Labelle. The proposed *Citizenship Act* includes a new section devoted to the notion of loyalty to Canada.

Quebec citizenship was an attribute held in common by all individuals residing in its territory. This concept of citizenship recognized differences while being based on adherence to common values.

This change in tone was accompanied by the downplaying of the notion of “cultural communities,” which had been in use in the public sphere for more than two decades to

tension between citizenship and diversity: Would it have a negative impact on diversity? Would it result in cuts to the support given to minority and immigrant advocacy groups?

The emphasis on Quebec citizenship was abandoned by the Liberal government elected in 2003. The *Ministère des Relations avec les Citoyens et de l’Immigration* (renamed *Ministère de l’Immigration et des*

the right to self-government of native peoples and is a step in their struggle for self-determination. It acknowledges their political aspirations as well as, implicitly, their right to potentially challenge Quebec’s identity, citizenship and territory.

Over the past 25 years, Quebec has been the site of an intense debate on the role of the state and of public institutions in the accommodation of diversity, as well as on the redefinition of the notion of nation or distinct society, and on the implications of the notion of Quebec citizenship. This dynamic has transformed the symbolic world of identities.

Many surveys and qualitative studies have recorded the transition from an ethnicized identity (French Canadian) to a territorial, political and national identity (Quebecers) among francophones and minority groups, sometimes combined with other identity options, such as Quebecer and Canadian, Italo-Canadian, Italo-Quebecer, Moroccan-born Quebecer, etc. This change from a “resistance identity” to a “project identity” allows for the possibility of accommodating a variety of identity components. A 2003 survey by *Génération Québec*, involving 1,025 young respondents born abroad or with parents born outside Canada, showed that 28 percent had adopted a Quebec identity and 34 percent a Canadian identity; 67 percent thought that Quebec is a distinct society relative to the rest of Canada, and 40 percent stated that they were in favour of Quebec sovereignty in partnership with the rest of Canada.

The sovereignist movement itself has undergone profound changes under the influence of the growing diversity of Quebec society. The presence of Quebecers of different ethnic origins in a variety of sovereignist political bodies has contributed to the breakup of the traditional consensus of minorities in favour of the federalist option. Their votes are now spread

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designate Quebecers of non-French, non-British origin. Like the federal government, the Quebec government promoted its policies with symbolic events such as citizenship week, citizenship awards, certificates of civic merit, and so on.

The new orientation did not always go smoothly. In 2000, for example, in the midst of the controversy surrounding Bill C-20 at the federal level (the *Clarity Act*) and Bill 99 in Quebec (*an Act respecting the exercise of the fundamental rights and prerogatives of the Quebec people and the Quebec state*), the Quebec-sponsored National Forum on Citizenship and the Integration of Immigrants caused a great deal of commotion. Among other things, it raised the question of whether a provincial government has the authority or legitimacy needed to discuss Quebec citizenship. Some opponents interpreted this not only as an outdated claim to sovereignty in the new “post-national” environment, but also as a new stage in the French assimilation plan, which they saw as a hallmark of the Quebec government’s actions since Bill 101. There were questions as well regarding the

Communautés culturelles in February 2005) proposed a new action plan (*Des valeurs partagées, des intérêts communs*), which harked back to the 1990 statement and to the notions of interculturalism, cultural communities and moral values, and removed all references to Quebec citizenship. The topic of public security appeared for the first time in the action plan. According to Premier Jean Charest, security is now the major issue in relations between Quebec and the United States. This represents a realignment with federal preoccupations and a clear move towards a more conservative stance.

The recognition of the 10 First Nations and of the Inuit people of Quebec in 1985 and the *Paix des Braves*, a nation-to-nation agreement signed in 2002 by the Crees of Quebec and the provincial government, are other key developments. According to Cree leaders and intellectuals, the *Paix des Braves* will contribute to a fundamental redefinition of relations between the Amerindian nations and the Quebec nation. The agreement goes further than the recognition of the status of nation that took place in 1985: it confirms

across a variety of political parties in Quebec. Among minorities, supporters of Quebec sovereignty invoke not only economic and political arguments and the need for structural changes to reverse fiscal imbalances and counter the federal government's encroachment on provincial jurisdiction, but also argue that sovereignty will contribute to a better integration of Quebecers from a variety of backgrounds in a "project" based on citizen values, bring an end to the confusion between the policies of Quebec and Canada, and promote Quebec's interests in the international arena. Supporters of the opposite view refer to such arguments as loyalty to Canada, economic insecurity, the fear of losing the Canadian passport, the protection of minority rights, etc. Arguments on both sides of the issue have become more sophisticated and are discussed more freely in public debates.

Quebec society, however, is also confronted with inequalities and discrimination. In 2001, the overall unemployment rate stood at 8 percent, but for immigrants it was 12 percent and for "visible minorities" 15.4 percent; among the latter, 16.1 percent of Afro-Quebecers were unemployed. As elsewhere in Canada, academic credential recognition, funding of and access to French-language and integration services, and representation in the public sphere (civil service, government, political parties, institutions, etc.) are critical issues.

In the last two decades, native political leaders have waged information and awareness campaigns aimed at drawing attention to the economic and political circumstances and demands of their communities in international fora. This global strategy is not limited to the First nations. A qualitative survey conducted in Quebec in 2001 with my colleague François Rocher, involving 60 political leaders who represented and promoted the interests of native peoples, ethnic

and racial minorities, and women, revealed a number of interesting common points in this regard. Their associations and NGOs are increasingly using international fora, summits and institutions (the UN, the OAS, the ILO, etc.) to promote their respective causes by invoking international standards and goals. These organizations have developed global networks with a view to stimulating changes in the public sphere and redefining the parameters of Canadian and Quebec citizenship. Social inequalities and discrimination remain the true underlying motivations for the global actions of native peoples, women, and ethnic and racial minorities.

Discerning a path for the future is not easy. It seems likely, however, that the conservative political climate

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that has impregnated public policy in the past decade will be offset by a renewal of social struggles and protests. Inequality and discrimination are inherent in the economic system in which we live. Despite the praise that has been heaped on diversity and despite the wheeling and dealing that has been associated with it in recent years in the halls of power, obstacles to the true exercise of citizenship remain. The benefits associated with the welfare state, human rights and the protection of the rights of native peoples, minorities, refugees and asylum seekers are constantly being challenged.

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issues as racial and ethnic profiling are high on the agendas of governments, municipalities and organizations advocating for minority rights. At the international level, racism has become so worrisome that UNESCO has undertaken a vast project aimed at creating an international coalition of cities united against racism.

Religious issues have assumed a dominant and dangerous place in public debates, and there has been a return to theories of cultural determinism. These cultural generalizations, in particular with regard to Islam, have the potential to harden positions in disputes about such matters as the wearing of scarves and Islamic tribunals, subsidies to private denominational schools and secularism. Finally, the question of remembering historical injustices committed against specific

minorities and offering reparations remains a priority.

All of these matters must be dealt with holistically together with social issues. The quality of intercultural relations depends on it. In short, despite the fact that the steps taken to enhance diversity are celebrated in a variety of fora by the supporters of multiculturalism, they raise issues that could well undermine Canada's vaunted tolerance. (Article translated from the French)

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