



A Multicultural Society

The nation of minorities called Canada has been compared to a mosaic and a flower garden. And indeed this remarkable cosmopolitan society offers many rewards. Now the time has come to demonstrate the reality behind the rhetoric. And to prove that equality and fraternity really can exist...

□ There is tea from China, shortbread from Scotland, canned salsifis from Belgium. There is couscous from Morocco, taco pastry from Mexico, feta cheese from Greece. At the meat counter you find Polish, German and Italian sausages and beef butchered in the French fashion. Delicatessens like this flourish in all of the larger cities of Canada, and people of practically every racial origin under the sun come to choose among their multifarious goods.

Here the richness of Canada's multicultural society gleams through among the colourfully-packaged foodstuffs from scores of nations. These crowded shelves are an unconscious celebration of all that Canada has gained by offering a home to people from around the world. Canada traditionally has been regarded in other nations as an essentially dull place of diligent but plodding inhabitants — grey figures on a grey landscape. There may have been some truth to this impression long ago; thanks to the zest infused into this country by millions of immigrants and their descendants over the years, it is anything but true now.

Contemporary Canadians, no matter what their mother tongue, are the beneficiaries of a world of cultural inspiration. More than they usually realize, they have incorporated the ways of other nations into their own way of life. This shows in their clothing, housing, furnishings, pastimes, cuisine, and attitudes. Nor have they partaken uniformly of the same influences; on the contrary, the range of choice is so broad and Canadian tastes so diffuse that it is often lamented that Canadians

have no distinctive national culture of their own.

In a sense, though, this diffusion and amenability to the unfamiliar *is* the Canadian culture. The tradition of absorbing the best from various cultural sources goes to Canada's roots. As a native Indian leader has pointed out, the original Canadians formed a multicultural and multilingual society long before the first white man ever came to the country. The upper part of North America was occupied by tribes as different from one another as Swedes are from Corsicans, with all the strains in between.

Despite the violence that marred relations between the Indians and whites in the early years of European settlement, the two groups went ahead and pooled their lore and artifacts. From the Indians the French-Canadians learned woodcraft and adopted snow-shoes, moccasins and canoes. While they brought alcohol and strange diseases to the Indians, the white men also brought iron pots and axes, woven fabrics and fire-arms. On balance, the intermingling of these contrasting peoples may have done more harm than good — but it did do some good nevertheless.

In later years the French and English forged alliances with Indian tribes as they battled for control of North America. When the war for Canada finally ended, the victorious "English" (many of whom were actually Gaelic-speaking Scots) joined in a marriage of convenience with the Indians and *Canadiens* to probe the wilderness and fight off invasions from the newly-created United States. An interchange of crafts and customs ensued between French- and English-

speaking Canadians in their common interests. Yet they stayed identifiably different, as they are to this day.

The perpetuation of separate French and English identities in defiance of historic animosities formed the foundation of the great Canadian *modus vivendi*. The principle that citizens of different national origins should maintain their own ways of life without detracting from their rights was enshrined in Canadian political philosophy even before the Canadian nation was born. Following the first discussions in 1864 among the British North American colonies on the founding of the Dominion of Canada, one of the Fathers of Confederation, Hector Langevin, explained:

"In Parliament there will be no question of race, nationality, religion or locality . . . The basis of action adopted by the delegates to the Quebec Conference in preparing the resolutions was to do justice to all — justice to all religions, to all nationalities, and to all interests."

The respect for national and religious identities smoothed the way for the settlement of large numbers of Scottish, Irish, German, Ukrainian, Polish and Scandinavian immigrants to Canada in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While William Howard Taft, President of the United States from 1909 to 1913, would boast, "We have taken millions of foreigners into our civilization, but we have amalgamated them all, we have made them all Americans", there was little taste for such thorough-going assimilation here. "We have bred a type," Taft jubilated; for a variety of reasons, none wholly unselfish, there was no great interest in breeding a typical Canadian. Instead, Taft's contemporary head of government, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, echoed a popular sentiment when he compared Canada to a gothic cathedral made of marble, oak and granite. "This is the image I would like Canada to become," he declared. "For here I want the marble to remain the marble; the granite to remain the granite; the oak to remain the oak; and out of all these elements I would build a nation great among the nations of the world."

But if politicians may build nations, they are only upheld by the will of ordinary citizens. Had the people of Canada allowed their cultural and religious differences to split them into hostile factions, Laurier's cathedral would have collapsed in ruins. That people did not do so in Canada's

pioneering days, when racial discrimination was rife elsewhere, seems partly due to the exigencies of the land and its climate. In a situation where one's survival might well depend on the aid of a neighbour regardless of his race or religion, it was prudent at least to keep one's prejudices to oneself.

It is difficult to hate for no good reason a man who shares a mid-day meal with you after you have both put in a hard morning's work

Conditions in the primarily agrarian Canada to which more than 3 million immigrants came between the mid-1890s and World War I often threw members of different national groups unexpectedly together. "Now the Ukrainians were used to the cold and knew how to build good houses, but we didn't," one of the first Black American settlers in northern Alberta recalled recently. "They had a way of plastering their houses with something they mixed out of clay and dirt and other things and could plaster up a house just as nice as stucco. Sometimes the coloured folks would hire the Ukrainians to help with their homes."

Through contact of this kind, the innate barriers of suspicion among racial groups were breached. "Ignorance alone makes monsters and bugbears," wrote William Hazlitt; "our actual acquaintances are very commonplace people." It is difficult to hate for no good reason a man who shares a mid-day meal with you after you have both put in a hard morning's work. In an age of intolerance, Canadians came to practise the paradoxical brand of selective tolerance typified by Jonathan Swift's statement: "Principally I hate and detest that animal called man; although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas and so forth." There was still much intolerance; yet it is evident there was sufficient plain human goodwill to permit a multicultural society to germinate.

Its growth over the decades since has not been without its difficulties and set-backs. Yet again, at least a sufficiency of tolerance has prevailed. As more and more people from more and more countries streamed in looking for a new life in the years following World War II, a spirit of casual generosity overrode intergroup bickering, racial prejudice and recurring complaints that immigrants were taking away jobs from Canadians. As a result, well

over 4 million newcomers from approximately 100 nations and colonies have settled in Canada in a general atmosphere of goodwill since 1945.

This mass influx of people from so many different lands has wrought striking changes in Canadian life, mainly for the better. The economy and the arts and sciences have been strengthened greatly by the contributions of "new Canadians" from far and wide. They have brought the world to Canada and brought Canada into the world by adding a cosmopolitan dimension to the outlook of their native-born compatriots. They have made the Canadian scene immeasurably brighter as well.

Can such a loosely-knit patchwork of ethnic groups have a common cause?

The cumulative effect of immigration in the twentieth century has been to turn Canada into a nation of minorities. At the beginning of the century people of British origin made up about 57 per cent of the population — although it should be noted that this group was a composite of English, Scottish, American, Irish and Welsh. The 1971 Census showed that, even when all these disparate Anglo-Saxons and Celts of different religions and tenure in Canada were classed as a single racial entity, they comprised less than 45 per cent of the population. People of French origin made up the second largest group at 28.7 per cent; the rest originated in all parts of the world.

This new demographic pattern has presented a challenge to Canadians in their quest for unity. Can such a loosely-knit patchwork of ethnic groups ever hold together in a common cause? Few nations in the world have no homogeneous majority or pervasive national culture. Canada is unusual in having two official languages, English and French. All this makes the nation vulnerable to the forces of parochialism and divisiveness. Thus when in 1971 Canada was officially declared a "multicultural society within a bilingual framework", Canadians entered into an experiment in human relations which tests the goodwill of them all.

There can be no turning back to the homogeneity of the American-style "melting pot". The desire among cultural groups to assert their distinctive identities has only grown stronger in recent years. As a result, Canadians are now at the point where they must come to terms with their nation's

multicultural character if it is to survive as a cohesive working democracy. That great student of democracy, Lord Acton, wrote in 1836, "A State which is incompetent to satisfy different races condemns itself; a State which does not include them is destitute of the chief basis of self-government." How aptly these words apply to the case of Canada today.

The policy of official multiculturalism will only succeed if there is a full awareness of its inherent dangers. One of these has been pointed out forcefully by spokesmen for French Canada: that multiculturalism might be employed as a trojan horse to promote the English language and English-Canadian culture, thereby threatening the status of French-Canadians as one of Canada's founding peoples, and the survival of the French-Canadian way of life. Another is that the policy might lock ethnic citizens in their existing social and economic positions, reserving the top of the heap for its traditional occupants, who are mostly of British origin. Yet another is that multiculturalism might be exploited for partisan ends, pitting one group against another for the sake of political power.

Canadians, of all people, should appreciate the value of tolerance

Perhaps the greatest danger of all is that the multicultural policy could be distorted to further the evils it is designed to eliminate. Rosemary Brown, a former British Columbia cabinet minister of West Indian birth, has warned: "Multiculturalism should not, and must not, be a situation where ethnic groups maintain their cultural identity because they are alienated, isolated, oppressed, ostracized, categorized or manipulated on account of a particular cultural background."

In these demanding new circumstances it would be self-defeating to pretend, as in the past, that intolerance is an insignificant factor in Canadian society. Racial violence lately has reared its truly ugly head in Canadian cities which contain large numbers of non-white people. While overt racial conflicts make headlines, there is ample evidence that covert racial discrimination is practised in Canada daily. Certainly intolerance on both sides has envenomed the national debate over bilingualism and the political future of Quebec.

Yet Canadians, of all people, should appreciate the value of tolerance. Their history and their surroundings should teach them how little it costs in relation to its rewards. The tolerance of ethnic diversity in Canada has led indirectly to a tolerance of eccentricities and alternative lifestyles — of “doing your own thing”, as the current expression has it. A society which tolerates a diversity of cultures is also capable of tolerating a diversity of opinion, and so it does in Canada.

It is instructive to consider the elements of intolerance run wild

The consequences of a break-down of tolerance are all too obvious. Watching the news from other parts of the world, Canadians must find that they are a fortunate few. Northern Ireland and Lebanon provide the most recent and conspicuous, but not the only, examples of what happens to people when intolerance predominates. Many present-day Canadians know the oppression and terror of intolerance first-hand, having fled from it elsewhere. And lest we forget, more than a million Canadians served — and almost 50,000 died — in a war to eradicate the unspeakable racist scourge of Nazism not so long ago. In this context it is instructive to consider the elements of intolerance run wild: jealousy, suspicion, cruelty, ignorance, vindictiveness, and a contempt for the dignity of one's fellow human beings.

Intolerance, then, is an amalgam of the worst of human emotions. It should be beneath civilized people; but civilization is a fragile state, as the periodic plunges by mankind into barbarism still prove. Let no one be deluded that civilization is inviolate in Canada. Our national woodwork has at least its share of bigots, bullies and related rabble ever-alert for an opportunity to come crawling out.

Politicians may erect elaborate institutional structures to support the spirit of multicultural tolerance, but again it is up to ordinary citizens to uphold it. Government-sponsored folk festivals

and ethnic conferences are worth little if they do not advance the mass public understanding needed to sustain the multicultural ideal.

Up to now, Canada has been a nation in which everyone is considered equal, but some are more equal than others. For many years the picture of Canadian democracy presented by governments and educational institutions was something like the picture of Dorian Gray — not to be examined too closely for fear of being confronted with the unsightly facts underlying the face shown to the world. Canadians of the dominant Anglo-Celtic group congratulated themselves for their tolerance while they expected members of other ethnic groups to be good sports and keep in their subordinate places. The door was opened no more than a crack to non-white immigration until only a few years ago. The false face has since melted in the heat of democratic dissent, and now real injustices must be corrected in a spirit of real tolerance. If not, the multicultural society could one day turn into a cockpit for multicultural strife.

So the time has come to replace rhetoric with reality. It must be made manifest that the remarkable multicultural community which has grown up in Canada is not a political mirage; that it really does offer the best hope of equality for all concerned. To achieve this, individual Canadians must show that they are capable of rising above the antagonistic tribalism which has always blighted the human condition. They must prove the unlikely proposition that there can be unity in diversity. In so doing, they may also prove that there are such things as enlightenment and human progress left in this world.

The New Look

With this edition we introduce a modernized version of the Monthly Letter, featuring somewhat briefer essays and a new typographical design aimed at easier reading. While this is a departure from former practice, we intend to maintain the traditional high standard of commentary on a wide range of subjects which has won the esteem of people the world over. We trust that the Monthly Letter will prove to be as useful and enjoyable to readers in the future as it has been in the past.