

HUMANISM

Canadian Multiculturalism's Secret Weapon



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Abstract

The essence of Multiculturalism is the desire to thrive as individuals in the way of one's own choosing in a society of others who want to do the same. All migrants share this desire. Multiculturalism is intended to preserve the cultural freedom of all individuals and provide recognition of the contributions of diverse ethnic groups. Canada's embracing of Multiculturalism was a pivotal change in government policy and this essay touches upon that and compares with Periyar's vision of an equal and equitable society.

I am an immigrant. In 1967, when I was 6 months old, my family left our home country for the promise of a better life in Canada. That home country: England. Make no mistake, this was a difficult transition for us!

A different culture – no pubs and not a decent game of cricket to be found.

A different language – sidewalks instead of pavements, trucks, not lorries and tire spelt with an “i” and not a “y”.

Different food and drink – no pint of bitter; sweet pies but no meat pies!?

And my new town of Cobourg was very different too. Such diversity! We were surrounded by peoples from all nations – Ireland, Wales, Scotland and there were even a few Italians and Dutch! How would the Dowsett family survive the crushing weight of these *massive* differences?

Most treasured Humanists, most honoured new friends, my family's migrant story is not the one most people would imagine when thinking about those coming to Canada today. The more typical Canadian migrant story, whether it's that of a refugee fleeing their war-torn country

or of an economic migrant in search of a better future, is full of serious challenges: learning a new language, feeling isolated without family or community, not understanding the rules of a strange culture and, very likely, facing the stony stares of those who view you and your loved ones as “the other”. But what all migrants do share is the desire to thrive as individuals in the way of one’s own choosing in a society of others who want to do the same: this is the essence of Multiculturalism.

In a statement to the House of Commons on October 8th, 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced multiculturalism as an official policy of the government of Canada. Multiculturalism was intended to preserve the cultural freedom of all individuals and provide recognition of the contributions of diverse ethnic groups to Canadian society. Though Canada’s embracing of Multiculturalism was a pivotal change in government policy it was also a long overdue recognition of the simple fact: *Canada has always been a Multicultural society*. We have never had the strong national identity of other countries. In the thousands of years before Europeans first landed in the New World there were many tribes of Indigenous peoples, separate and distinct.

Then the French and English colonists added their two solitudes to the mix in the First Wave of immigration¹. In the Second Wave, huge numbers of British

subjects came to the Canadian colonies, causing the population to explode from 460,000 in 1800 to 3.4 million by Confederation in 1867(2). In the early 1900’s Ukrainian, Polish and Russian newcomers rode the Third Wave to farm the newly established prairie provinces. In the post-World War 2 Fourth Wave, Italians, Portuguese and Greeks contributed their skills and flavour across the nation. Since 1971, the Fifth Wave has seen immigration from India, China and other Asian countries exceeding European migration. In the next few years, Africa will overtake Europe as the second largest source of immigrants to Canada for the first time. This change could signal the coming of a Sixth Wave. So, since 1971, Canada has been officially Multicultural but in composition, we always were.

Denying our intrinsic Multiculturalism caused major problems for Canada in our first 100 years. Successive governments were obsessed with forging a strong national identity that was rooted in British and French colonial history. In the name of this obsession, horrific deeds were committed.

Residential Schools were founded with the objective of taking “the Indian out of the child” said our first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, as Canada wrestled with its “Indian Problem”. This sentiment was the poison at the heart of Canada’s greatest shame.

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_Canada

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population_of_Canada

Add to this list:

- ◆ The Japanese internment during World War 2.
- ◆ The Chinese Head tax and later,
- ◆ The Chinese Exclusion Act which prevented Chinese people entering Canada altogether for 24 years.
- ◆ The 1914 SS Komagata Maru incident where 376 British subjects from the Punjab were denied entry to Canada on the basis of their race.
- ◆ The 1939 MS St Louis tragedy where a ship containing 907 Jews fleeing Nazi Germany was left to wander the Atlantic and finally forced to return to Europe where many of the passengers perished in the Holocaust.

All these dark deeds rooted in a narrow view of Canadian National Identity.

These great and specific shames can be viewed as dark stains on the fabric of Canadian society, already interwoven with threads of racism, bigotry and intolerance that caused immigrants to deny their culture, their heritage, their language and even give up their names to do what was expected

– assimilate.

In his address to the House of Commons on that momentous day in 1971, Prime Minister Trudeau eloquently summarized the whole reason for official “Multiculturalism in a bilingual framework” saying:

“There cannot be one cultural policy for Canadians of British and French origin, another for the original peoples and yet a third for all others. For, although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other. No citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian, and all should be treated fairly.”

We are all equal. We should all be treated fairly. This is the Canadian Dream.

These two simple statements also point clearly to the underlying secret weapon of our nation’s multiculturalism – HUMANISM. With the repatriation of the Constitution in 1982 and the adoption of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canada stripped away the last vestiges of our class-ridden roots and proceeded down an impressively secular humanist path to being a country where:

- ◆ All are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
- ◆ Democracy, the Rule of Law and human rights are shared values.
- ◆ We value reasoning and the scientific method as vital for knowing the world.
- ◆ We are free to Speak our minds and test our opinions in open debate.
- ◆ We are free to find meaning and purpose in our own lives.

But, above all, Canada is a country where your cultural heritage will not determine your life outcomes.

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Respect_Movement

4 <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/rankings>

We are lucky in Canada to be part of a society that Periyar himself seemed to be envisioning when he said:³ "we are fit to think of 'self-respect' only when the notion of 'superior' and 'inferior' caste is banished from our land".

These secular humanist underpinnings are what make Canada one of the most desirable countries to migrate to and live in. In the US News Best Countries Report of 2021⁴, Canada once again finished first. Of the 76 attributes Canada was scored upon, almost half benefitted from our secular humanist core. Attributes like being committed to race, gender and income equality, concern for human rights, the environment and democracy, equal access to justice, education and government.

We are best placed to fulfill the vast potential of our multicultural society when we focus on those essentially human values able to be shared by all humans, not by privileging cultures over the rights of individuals.

The challenge for Canada over the decades leading up to our bicentennial year of 2067 will be for us to continually renew the secular humanist core of our society by educating those hundreds of thousands of people that immigrate to our country each year about the institutions and values that made us the just, progressive, adaptable, fair and friendly society they chose in the first place. The institutions and values that safeguard the unfettered expression

of their chosen culture and make our multiculturalism work so well!

I immigrated to Canada in 1967 and became a Canadian citizen in 1980. I was very fortunate to never have my ability to find a place in Canadian society obstructed by my cultural heritage. By continuing to insist upon the individual rights common to everyone as recognized in secular humanism, all those coming to Canada will be able to count on the welcome acceptance that my family experienced and to quickly become a part of the rich and colourful mosaic that is our vibrant multicultural Canada.

(The above paper was presented at the 3rd International Humanism Conference on Social Justice – Toronto during Sep 2022.)

References

Provided as a footnote in the essay itself.

About the Author

Richard has been the HAT Coordinator since 2017. He first became a member of HAT in December 2011 and joined the Steering Committee as Treasurer in 2012. Experiencing Humanism as a practice that balances rationality with respect for all living creatures is the core of his philosophy. Providing others with a place to explore their own humanism is his passion.