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Time to Strengthen Canada's Commitment to Diversity

By Jane Jenson

There's a lot of talk about diversity these days, and many Canadians are no longer certain where they stand. Whereas in the past we celebrated diversity, we now sometimes fear it.

In recent decades, Canada has often been congratulated for its successful pluralism - notably the respect for official languages and language minorities, multiculturalism, the successful integration of successive waves of immigrants from around the globe and humane refugee policies. The Aga Khan, the 49th Nizari Ismaili *imam*, became the most recent international figure to call Canada "a model for the world".

The thousands of names of skilled and knowledgeable people on waiting lists for visas also testify to this reputation. Recently, when Germany decided finally to open its borders to badly needed immigrants in the knowledge industries, particularly from South Asia, it could not even fill the small quota it had set for itself. Potential immigrants prefer Canada, where they expect to encounter not simply tolerance (important as that is), but acceptance and respect for their contributions to building the future.

So why are some Canadians now fearful that perhaps there has been "too much" immigration, or that our officials have been "lax"? Perhaps it's the nationalistic and increasingly bellicose language of American leaders (that leaves no place for a balanced distribution of blame at home as well as abroad). In a world divided into "good" and "evil," we naturally want to be on the side of the good.

But our current uncertainties go beyond the current American discourse, so reminiscent of early Cold War rhetoric. Canadians are having second thoughts because successfully respecting and managing diversity is a lot harder than painting cowboy-esque scenarios of white hats and black hats. Living up to what some have called the "Canadian diversity model" is no easy feat.

Our research shows that Canada's diversity model requires a balancing act between the competing claims of principles we value. The tension happens in four areas, in particular:

- between the demands of uniformity and heterogeneity (conforming to one way of doing things, or accepting cultural and other differences),
- between individual rights and group rights (protecting only individuals, or protecting communities too),
- between institutional symmetry and asymmetry (one size fits all, or institutions adapted to culture and history), and
- between economic freedom and economic security (letting markets decide, or ensuring some measure of shared well-being).

There is never one clear choice between these alternatives. Accommodating diversity means selecting practices in each case that fall somewhere between the extremes.

For example, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is a fundamental charter of individual rights, but not a pure expression of individualism like the American *Bill of Rights*. Canada's Charter also recognizes group rights, and historic claims, whether of language, religious or national minorities.

To understand better, let's look at an example of this diversity model at work, but one that is far from the charged post-September 11 agenda.

In November 2001, the Quebec government and the Cree of Northern Quebec came to an historic agreement about future development in Cree lands. Referendums were held at the end of January 2002 in nine Cree communities. Votes in favour were in the 70% range. The process and result have been labelled a sort of peace treaty, ending conflicts in the James Bay territory that go back to the 1970s.

This agreement is a good example of finding a balance on all four aspects of the diversity model. The principle of *heterogeneity* was reflected by the government and Cree representatives negotiating "nation-to-nation", but the Quebec government also sought an agreement satisfying the needs of the whole society. The agreement respects *group rights*, by giving the Cree community greater control over development decisions as well as a financial settlement. Decisions were taken in *asymmetric* institutions; only Cree communities voted, while the rest of Quebecers were represented by their government ministers and other negotiators. *Economic security* is front and centre in the agreement for Quebecers, who still consider hydro development a cornerstone of future economic well-being, but also for the Cree. The agreement means direct income for the community (\$70 million annually for 48 years starting in 2004) as well as much-needed jobs, especially for the huge youth population.

This example of the diversity model at work has little to do with post-9/11 fears, of course. But it does provide lessons for thinking about diversity in general and today, in particular.

A first lesson to be taken to heart: it was hard to do. The Cree and Quebec governments had been locked in terrible conflicts, played out inside the province and on the international stage for decades. It took a long time and careful work to get to a position of trust. Just as necessary, is a re-building of trust in other communities within Canada. We will have to find ways, for example, to put aside the suspicions that isolate Muslim and Arab communities within Canada from their fellow citizens.

There have, of course, been efforts to reach out and not to stigmatise, but everything from speeches about the "evil" of some societies to the fears that Bill C-36, the new federal security law, will allow targeting of Arabs and Muslims means the task is on-going.

A second key lesson from the Quebec-Cree story is that it is an example of democracy at work. The nine communities discussed long and hard, heard out leaders and elders, and then they talked some more. Only after weeks of discussion did the Cree vote.

How we decide is just as important as what we decide in our diversity model. We need space for public deliberation, where political leaders, representatives of groups and associations, and individual citizens can meet. This must be a space where the inevitable conflicts that arise in a pluralist society can be openly examined. In a diverse society, such deliberation is essential if minorities are to be truly included in the broad citizenry.

The message here is: Canadians, now more than ever, need to be as concerned about the health of our democratic institutions as about security at the border, or new laws. This means healthy debate in Cabinet, Parliament and party caucus, and especially, sensitivity to the length of time that debate may take. Governments that move too quickly to legislate make it harder to manage diversity, rather than easier. It also means respectful debate, in which a wide range of voices are heard, no matter how unpleasant. Labelling certain voices beyond the pale risks fostering more extremism rather than less. This debate must happen in formal political institutions, but also in associations and groups in civil society. Finding leaders in marginalized communities, whether young people or those still struggling to find their economic feet and language skills, and bringing them into the discussion is an act of inclusion with far-reaching consequences.

In other words, if a healthy diversity is the goal, the only way to find our bearings and maintain the wide range of principles to which we are committed is to keep on talking frankly and respectfully and make sure all voices can be heard.

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