September 11th Aftermath: Canada's Diversity Model at Risk

November 26, 2001 – Ill-considered responses to the events of September 11th 2001 could put Canada's success in managing its diverse society at risk.

That's the view of an author of a new paper from CPRN.

"It is critical, in this over-heated context especially, that our democratic practice demonstrates, in every community, that cultural and religious diversity, political discussion and disagreement, are still valued and respected in Canada," says Jane Jenson, Director of CPRN's Family Network.

Jenson is the co-author, with University of Toronto political scientist, Martin Papillon, of ***The "Canadian Diversity Model": A Repertoire in Search of a Framework***, a new analysis of Canada's approach to diversity. The paper examines the practices in Canada that guide choices about economic, social and cultural differences. It proposes an approach to understanding what the authors call the *repertoire* of the "Canadian diversity model".

"A diverse society is one in which differing cultural perspectives naturally engender value conflicts," says Jenson. "A political space, where a search for balance among competing conceptions can take place, is an essential part of the Canadian diversity model."

Canadian experience, the authors argue, shows that unity and diversity are not exclusive concepts. On the contrary, diversity can be seen as a strength, something that will enhance unity. The relationship between the two is one of interdependence.

There is, however, still a balance to be struck between the competing claims of unity and diversity. Finding that balance requires a healthy and pervasive democracy open to all citizens.

"We have to be careful not to reduce the space for democratic politics and cross-cultural discourse in our rush to strengthen public security in the wake of September 11th," Jenson says.

"In the past, each time democracy has been sacrificed to security, as it was with the War Measures Act in the World Wars and in 1970, the long-term consequences have enfeebled, rather than strengthened Canada's capacity to manage the diversity in our midst."

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Jenson and Papillon suggest that the Canadian diversity model is characterized by a series of choices made in terms of four dimensions of competing values:

- uniformity ---------- heterogeneity
- individual rights ---------- group rights
- symmetry ---------- asymmetry
- economic freedom ---------- economic security

The end points of each dimension are part of the range of values held by Canadians as a whole, although the majority prefers somewhere in between. At any moment in history, the balance point may be closer to one end than the other. Of course, reality is more complex and most issues involve more than one dimension.

The tension in each dimension is between responses based on a preference for formal individual equality, where everyone is treated the same, and those that take into account history, context and the importance of community.

“In a society that values diversity, we have to move away from formal equality towards institutions and practices that are more conscious of differences,” says Jenson.

How far can we move without jeopardizing the values of equal treatment and liberal freedoms, and that shared sense of belonging essential for social cohesion? The answer, Jenson and Papillon say, lies in our collective choices in democratic institutions of all sorts.

Returning to the aftermath of September 11th, the authors argue that, today more than ever, the diversity model must be nurtured not starved.

“We must use our democratic institutions, at all levels and in all communities, to find the balance points, new ones if necessary, that Canadians wish to identify in these new circumstances,” Jenson says. “A conflict of this order, at the international level, challenges us to continue to manage the tensions and conflict within our society, and to accept them as normal.”

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