

Democratic Practices

Based on Jane Jenson and Martin Papillon, *The “Canadian Diversity Model”:
A Repertoire in Search of a Framework* (CPRN, 2001).

The “Canadian Diversity Model”

A country such as Canada, where conflicts over the nature and boundaries of the political community are constantly debated and negotiated, requires a strong and healthy public sphere. Canada’s diversity model depends on democratic spaces that foster and structure on-going dialogue. The public sphere also has a significant role to play in mediating conflict. For this reason, individual citizens from all sectors of society and all backgrounds must have the resources to participate effectively in the political process. Support for intermediary institutions, such as advocacy and voluntary organizations representing marginalized groups, is equally essential. And it should not be forgotten that public institutions can exercise leadership, as well as represent.

The Canadian approach to diversity has long depended on a commitment to equality within a liberal democratic framework. This commitment is the common thread running through the four dimensions of choice that have been identified to describe the lines of tension within the political community. The inclusion and participation of all citizens in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the community is, therefore, the necessary starting point for the successful management of diversity, as well as an end in itself.

Debate – about the balance points along each of the four dimensions – and collective choices – about the mix between uniformity and diversity – are crucial to the functioning of the model. Creating conditions where debate and collective choice are possible, in civil society as well as in everyday politics, has to be the fundamental aim of a diverse and pluralistic society such as Canada.

Democracy at Its Core

In Canada’s diversity model, the appeal to first principles is rarely possible. There is, for example, no one “right way” to work with the model that can be identified through simple appeal to a foundational law, such as the Constitution. As the foregoing discussion shows, there are always a range of possible choices between competing values. The diversity model depends on simultaneously seeking equal treatment and recognizing difference. It also acknowledges the need for active intervention to achieve equal outcomes, recognizing that formal equality may not always suffice. As a result, a decision rule is needed, choices must be made.

In a pluralist society, where cultures and values are increasingly varied, locating positions of compromise between and among competing values is a challenging task. Courts are important institutions for confirming societal choices, but hard choices are often better decided in the political than the judicial realm. Choices about the balance points between competing values, therefore, depend on democratic processes, in the broadest sense. In the Canadian diversity model, which is as much a commitment to fair practices as to specific outcomes, *process is as important as content*.

When functioning well, democratic institutions provide mechanisms for grappling with *conflict*, whether over values, ideas or interests. For decision rules to work well, it is not necessary for citizens to come to a consensus about values. They must, however, develop the capacity to consider, assess, tolerate and then respect the value positions defended by other citizens. When well conducted, such democratic deliberation leads to decisions that are sustainable and can anchor good policy.

The challenge, then, in Canada's increasingly pluralistic society is to find new and democratic practices to manage conflict over legitimate value differences in order to arrive at choices that are fair, reasonable and acceptable within the model. Doing so will require Canadians to recognize that:

- their fellow citizens are justified in holding value positions different from their own;
- choices among legitimate alternatives must be made; and
- citizens have the capacity, through their institutions, to make such choices.

This will require a sea change in the existing practices of Canadian democracy. The model of elite accommodation that, until recently, reserved the task of resolving conflict emerging from regional, cultural, linguistic and religious differences to small groups of leaders, has been found wanting and been rejected. The vision of limited democracy embodied by this model no longer meets the expectations of citizens, who display less trust in politicians and make claims for expanded democratic participation.

An active and engaged civil society is critical to the proper functioning of the Canadian diversity model. Founded on a constant search for balance, it requires healthy and inclusive institutions, both public and private, inside which participation can occur and through which routes to representation are opened. The challenge for Canada, as a diverse society with national minorities and a wide range of ethnocultural and religious groups, is therefore to develop an inclusive political culture that not only *permits*, but *encourages and supports* participation and access to decision making.

Finding the institutions and practices that will enable democratic choices is never easy. There are a number of possible routes to representation and arrangements for governance. The conventional practices of liberal democracy, such as *elections and party politics*, are indispensable. But so, too, are the various *institutions of interest intermediation* – community groups, ethnic associations, lobbies, professional associations, social movements and faith-based organizations, for example – that allow citizens to gather and find common ground

with one another. There are also various strategies and arrangements for involving and *engaging citizens* beyond elections and group representation.

The next section demonstrates how these three routes to representation – elections and party politics; civil society and institutions of interest intermediation; and engaging citizens – can both help and hinder the operation of the Canadian diversity model.

Conclusion

The Canadian diversity model continues to evolve in the face of a changing environment. To be successful, it requires, on an ongoing basis, that Canadians choose a mix between:

- heterogeneity and uniformity
- individual and group rights
- the expectations of constitutional equality and the necessity of a degree of asymmetry
- market freedoms and assuring economic security

Public space for deliberation that is both participatory and inclusive is needed in a highly diverse society. Such deliberation both ensures that minorities are included in the broad citizenry and reinforces the legitimacy of public institutions and policies for groups whose voices are often obscured by majority rule.