

The “Canadian Diversity Model”: Overview

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

The conviction that Canadian national identity is rooted in diversity – rather than in the elimination of difference – shapes public discourse in Canada. This does not mean that living with diversity is easy. Nor does it mean that all Canadians value diversity to the same extent. Tensions arise over how best to balance competing values. Learning how to respect diversity, while still maintaining unity, remains a perpetual challenge.

*The “Canadian Diversity Model”:
A Repertoire in Search of a Framework* is a synthesis of some of the thinking about what makes Canada work. This note, the first in a series of six, introduces the major elements of the model. The repertoire of competing values and practices that characterize the “model” are reviewed in more detail in separate notes.

A Repertoire of Responses

The “Canadian diversity model” is a repertoire of responses to Canada’s longstanding sociological diversity. Content and process are equally important. Compromise between sets of competing values and a repertoire of liberal democratic practices that guide conflict resolution characterize the “model”. It is a repertoire because these practices are interrelated and compromise between competing values requires choice. The model also involves a repertoire of players: the participation of both civil society and state actors are essential to its success.

As a repertoire, the “model” describes possibilities but it also sets limits; these can be expanded with sufficient effort.

Content and Process

Seeking balance between competing values involves searching for compromise. The Canadian diversity model is made up of a repertoire of choices between competing values. This is the content of the model. Because new conditions continually arise to challenge old accommodations, the success of the Canadian way depends on the existence of rules for making those choices. These rules, or processes, derive from the decision rules and practices of liberal democracy, a system of governance that has defined the Canadian nation-state since the 19th century.

In Canada, these rules also derive in large measure from the long-standing contention of Canadians that liberal democratic government can be an instrument for collective action. The state has played a critical role in setting some boundary conditions for choice between competing values and promoting inclusion – so much so that diversity itself has become a cornerstone of the Canadian citizenship regime.

In common with other liberal democracies, Canada faces the challenge of striking the right mix between individual freedom and the creation of conditions of equality.

In pluralistic societies, where cultures and values are more diverse, the attainment of this mix is even more challenging. Notions of equality may vary between majorities and minorities, as well as within each group, while differing definitions of freedom can also produce diverging ideas about the role of the state. A set of public and private practices to guide conflict resolution are needed.

A society's repertoire for handling conflict between concurrently important value choices – including conflict arising from cultural, social and economic diversity – is limited to those responses that are *generally considered legitimate*. Only when a response to conflict has achieved legitimacy – although not necessarily consensus – within a given society can it be added to the repertoire. What constitutes a legitimate response to conflict will vary from society to society, even within liberal democracies.

The Four Dimensions of Difference

Balancing concurrently important values produces tensions within all liberal democracies, although the tensions themselves may differ. Four key dimensions of difference underpin the Canadian diversity model. The following sets of terms represent the end points within each dimension of choice:

Uniformity—Heterogeneity: the practices that acknowledge, or do not acknowledge, the diversity of political and social identities.

Individual Rights—Group Rights: the rights extended to guarantee protection to groups as well as individual citizens.

Symmetry—Asymmetry: the practices of the state that institutionalize differential representation of communities.

Economic Freedom—Economic Security: the institutional forms and practices to achieve socio-economic equity and achieve substantive equality.

In each case, both end points are discernible in the range of values held by Canadians as a whole.

Although some individuals or groups may position themselves at one end and reject the other, the majority of Canadians prefer to situate themselves somewhere in the middle of each dimension.

Equal and Different

Value tensions – and choices – are inherent in these four dimensions of difference. These tensions reflect the fundamental debate over equality that exists in liberal democracies. The classic or procedural conception of individual equality holds that inclusion and cohesion depends on everyone being treated the same. At the other end of the spectrum is the view that a commitment to equality entails some recognition of historical differences, including differences based on culture, gender, race and many other human characteristics.

The parameters of the debate over equality are reflected in the four dimensions of difference that characterize the Canadian diversity model.

In each case, the words on the left reflect the classic, liberal characterization of the debate. Those on the right express the need for institutions and practices that recognize differences.

As a society that values diversity, the question for Canada has been how best to achieve inclusion and cohesion. How far, in other words, can Canadians move toward a definition of equality that values differences without jeopardizing the equal treatment of individuals or the shared sense of community essential to a cohesive political community?

Answering this fundamental question requires collective choice-making through democratic institutions of all kinds. Democratic processes and practices are therefore integral to the working of the Canadian diversity model. They are used to balance the tensions that result from the *acknowledgment* of rival values.



Canadian society and institutions have developed an array of responses to manage the tensions inherent in each of the four dimensions of difference, as well as across the dimensions.

A number of working principles underpin the operation of the Canadian diversity model:

- ❖ There is no absolute contradiction between a commitment to equal treatment and liberal freedoms and a commitment to the recognition of difference and particular treatment, when needed, to enhance equality.
- ❖ Working toward inclusion involves a constant balance between the principle of equal and uniform treatment and the need to provide special treatment – and therefore different treatment – of special categories of persons.
- ❖ The tensions are manageable, within a range of possible choices, and these choices are not fixed or immutable.
- ❖ Electoral politics and other institutions of collective decision-making provide the mechanisms for arriving at choices within each dimension.

We have separated the four dimensions of difference for the purpose of analysis; however, in practice they are entwined, informing debates over everything from intergovernmental relations and federalism to social policy benefits. Canadians do not have the option – some would say the luxury – of addressing only one dimension at a time, or according greater significance to one than another.

The challenge for the Canadian diversity model is to reach a balance within and among the four dimensions of difference that most Canadian citizens will accept. This challenge is further complicated by the fact that there is no “right way” to work with the model – there is *always* a range of possible choices between competing values.

The Canadian diversity model depends on simultaneously seeking equal treatment and recognizing difference.

The model also recognizes that formal equality may not always suffice. Active intervention to achieve equal outcomes may be needed. Decision rules are needed, choices must be made.

Democratic Practices

In a pluralist society such as Canada, 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 difficult choices are often better decided in the political than the judicial realm. Choices about the balance points between competing values depend on democratic processes, in the broadest sense.

Because the Canadian diversity model 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 the decision rules to work well, it is not necessary for citizens to come to a consensus about values; however, they must 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 in Canada’s increasingly pluralistic society is to find new and democratic practices to manage conflict over legitimate value differences.

Such practices are needed 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 these choices.

Change of this order will require a sea change in the existing practices of Canadian democracy.

Until recently, the task of resolving conflict emerging from regional, cultural, linguistic and religious differences was reserved to small groups of leaders. In recent years, Canadians have rejected this model of elite accommodation. The limited vision of democracy it expressed no longer meets the expectations of citizens – many of whom display less trust in politicians and are making claims for expanded democratic participation.

An active and engaged civil society is critical to the proper functioning of the Canadian diversity model. Grounded in a constant search for balance, the model requires healthy and inclusive institutions,

both public and private. Such institutions enable participation and become routes for opening representation.

Canada's challenge is to develop an inclusive political culture that not only permits but also encourages and supports participation, as well as access to decision making.

Conclusion

Canada is a diverse society with national minorities and a wide range of ethno-cultural and religious groups. 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 frame the lines of tension within the political community.

The Canadian experience suggests that the inclusion and participation of all citizens in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the community is the necessary starting point for the successful management of diversity. It is also an end in itself.