

Economic Freedom – Economic Security

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

The “Canadian Diversity Model”

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 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.

Four key dimensions of difference underpin the Canadian diversity model. Each dimension of difference has two end points. Our principal aim here is to describe the tensions inherent in each dimension and, in doing so, to locate the “saw-offs” that characterize the contemporary Canadian diversity model. Another is to identify the unresolved issues that will likely shape political discourse in the future.

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The relationship between economic and social conditions and culture are an on-going concern of Canadians, who take pride in the commitment to social justice embedded in their public policy. Large-scale comparisons with other countries reveal Canada to be a country that has promoted a mix of liberal and social democratic values. The changing balance between economic freedom and economic security has implications for the working of the Canadian diversity model.

In previous decades, market relations were contained in the name of social justice, without threatening the country’s basic commitment to the principles of capitalism or economic liberalism. Social programs that expressed a notion of the collective good – what Canadians owed to each other – were central to an earlier citizenship regime. In the middle decades of the last century, these commitments were most visible in two types of public action: a demonstrated willingness to share the costs of unevenly distributed life risks through both the creation of social programs and the spatial redistribution – or “equalization” – of resources from “have” to “have-not” provinces.

The result was a mixed pattern. Canada never went as far as many smaller European countries, which built generous welfare states to protect citizens from many of the effects of market society. In most cases, Canadians chose instead to define the social rights of citizenship as safety nets, rather than



to promote greater equality of condition or actively structure labour markets. Universal programs were limited to education, health care, family allowances and pensions.

These choices nonetheless located Canada in-between the end points of the economic freedom-economic security dimension. Canada chose a universal and publicly funded health care system later than many European countries, but at the same moment that the United States was choosing public support only for the poor and elderly through Medicaid and Medicare. Similarly, Canada chose to finance the explosion of post-secondary education in the 1960s with a public – albeit not free – system, while American families continued to absorb the high costs of a prestigious university education.

In the present era of globalization, these choices are back on the table. We are again confronted with the question of how much diversity in socio-economic conditions we are willing to tolerate as a result of market freedom. There is also the question of whether dimensions of social and cultural diversity increasingly correlate with economic position, so that certain groups are at risk of exclusion from mainstream Canadian society for reasons of race, ethnicity, gender and so on. Integration into the mainstream of Canadian society may not be working as effectively as in the past, while patterns of economic and social inequalities may be solidifying.

There are also significant and menacing variations in the rates of economic success among ethnocultural and religious groups. A recent report on Metropolitan Toronto, using 1991 census data, found that residents of non-European origin had unemployment rates far above the average, reaching one in five for many groups. Young people's rates of unemployment were higher still, with rates of 30 percent among some groups, particularly youths of

Caribbean, African and Latin American origin. Even more distressing for the future was the fact that child poverty was endemic, reaching well beyond the 50 percent level among First Nations peoples and those reporting origins in Africa, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, an Arab country, West Asia, Mexico and Central America.

Assuring economic security for all may involve overcoming the blockages experienced by some groups in gaining real access to markets, and therefore to jobs and goods. In the case of immigrants, for example, past waves of newcomers could hope to achieve economic well-being by securing employment in the industrial economy. The contemporary service and information economies offer far less certainty. Racism and other forms of discrimination, non-recognition of educational credentials and a lack of networks can all create blockages to these markets. Vigilance to prevent discrimination, and efforts to promote inclusion, are therefore even more necessary if Canada is to become a learning society that values diversity of all sorts.