

# Symmetry – Asymmetry

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.

## Symmetry – Asymmetry

Institutional arrangements that provide some level of political autonomy for specific groups on the basis of their distinct cultural identity and history are also central to the working of the Canadian diversity model. Such arrangements conflict with the standard liberal conception of universal citizenship, which holds that, if everyone is to be treated the same, all citizens should share the same political institutions without distinction. It is within the institutions of federalism where this tension is traditionally played out.

The participation of national minorities in the Canadian federation is mediated by the existence of another level of societal allegiance. National minorities often claim recognition of this duality in the Canadian citizenship regime, seeking institutional acknowledgement that they are different from other minorities, *in ways that go beyond group-based rights protected by a single government*. The debate over symmetry and asymmetry therefore concerns two conflicting definitions of the country. Is Canada a single nation-state, or is it a multinational state with *institutional* recognition of national minorities?

In practice, Canadian political institutions are asymmetrical. The creation of federal institutions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was seen by contemporaries as a way to recognize that territorially-based diversity existed. As well as enabling the creation of a province with a French-speaking majority, the

*British North America Act* of 1867 gave provinces responsibility for key cultural areas, such as education and local government. From its inception as an autonomous state, then, Canada recognized that federalism serves a cultural purpose. As an element of the Canadian diversity model, the notion of asymmetry has been important for addressing the place of national minorities in the country.

In recent decades, the notion of asymmetry has been rejected in favour of a symmetrical understanding of Canada as a single nation-state composed of ten equal provinces, defined by territory rather than ethnicity. In the imaginations of many Canadians in the Trudeau and post-Trudeau eras, equality among the ten provinces is a core federal principle that is reinforced by the equality language of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and promoted to counter Quebec nationalism.

Efforts to resolve the tension between symmetrical and asymmetrical definitions of Canada produced a Canadian constitution that is asymmetrical in its arrangements. Canada is a territorial federation with a uniform division of power that also grants a degree of self-government to the French-speaking national minority concentrated in Quebec. Within Quebec, the minority can live as a majority and manage its own institutions. Moreover, certain policy decisions – in areas such as pensions, immigration and international relations – recognize that the government of Quebec may use certain prerogatives that the other provinces have, until now, elected not to exercise.

The process of negotiating self-government agreements with Aboriginal peoples is another area of asymmetrical institutional arrangements. Such agreements have both cultural and territorial dimensions. The current federal policy is to associate self-government agreements with land claim settlements, as a means of both enabling Aboriginal socioeconomic and cultural development and extending recognition of

territorial rights resulting from the Aboriginal presence in Canada prior to European colonization.

These asymmetrical arrangements vary greatly in nature and significance, depending on the group's claims and socioeconomic and political position. Whatever their form – public government as in the case of the Inuit, or the devolution of administrative powers as in Manitoba – these institutional arrangements are explicitly constructed around cultural groupings. Aboriginal peoples are Canadian citizens but with a fundamentally different relationship to the common institutions defined in the Constitution. Debate has arisen about the opportunity and consequences of creating these kinds of systematic asymmetries. There is a fear of creating “independent units” separate from Canada or special “categories of citizens” based on ethnic criteria. The link to the uniformity-heterogeneity debate is apparent.

In general, the tension between symmetry and asymmetry is one area where the Canadian diversity model has yet to achieve a satisfactory balance. There is a need for a clear debate about the positive and negative impacts of asymmetry on the country and its feasibility, as well as about the forms of collective choice appropriate for resolving differences.