

# Uniformity – Heterogeneity

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.

## Uniformity-Heterogeneity

The first and most basic dimension of the Canadian diversity model is the recognition and valuing of diversity itself. Although most societies are characterized by some degree of heterogeneity – differentiated socially, by gender and often by ethnic or religious differences – few societies explicitly identify such heterogeneity as legitimate, tending either to ignore differences or integrate some cleavages into the structure of political life. In contrast, Canada’s stance has long been to acknowledge a certain degree of heterogeneity, while seeking a wider commitment to being “Canadian” as the basis for some degree of commonality.

Political choices made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and embedded in the country’s basic political institutions – federalism, public education, law and the courts, for example – made a purely homogenous conception of citizenship impossible in Canada. More recent decisions reflect a continued commitment to those choices. The tensions between a homogenous and more heterogeneous model of citizenship remain important, however.

The British Crown first accepted and institutionalized the linguistic and religious differences of the two European peoples who founded modern Canada. The 1867 Constitution followed suit, establishing new rules for democratic decision making and extending to the provinces jurisdiction over education, language, justice in private matters, and culture. This division of



powers was the condition for Quebec's acceptance of permanent minority status for French-speaking Canadians in a federal Parliament. In short, the creation of a cohesive political community north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel required placing cultural and religious diversity at the heart of Canadian society.

One legacy of these choices has been an ongoing debate about how much heterogeneity Canadian society can accommodate while still maintaining some cohesion. There are two aspects to this question.

First of all, we can ask "how much" diversity is possible or desirable. What are the consequences of diversity for social cohesion? Some observers argue that too much diversity may lead to fragmentation, economic inequalities and erosion of social capital. Calls to limit immigration quotas in Canada today, for example, stem in part from a preoccupation with the consequences of greater diversity. But, even for Canadians committed to fostering multiculturalism or interculturalism, the question of how to deal with diversity still remains. Should society accept and even celebrate the multiple identities of its citizens, viewing them as a range of "equivalent choices"? Or should it insist

on a high degree of conformity to "community standards" while providing only basic protections against discrimination?

The second aspect refers to "what kind" of diversity should be acknowledged, highlighting in more specific terms the relation between political unity and diversity. The issue of public recognition of diversity underpins discussions of national unity in Canada. While ethno-cultural or multicultural differences are generally accepted, the recognition of Canada as a multinational state is still controversial. The most obvious example of this tension has been the difficulty of finding a place on the continuum that might recognize Quebec as a distinct national unit within Canada, without it being a threat to Canada itself. In recent years, the claims of Aboriginal peoples have begun to provoke similar concerns.

Finding a compromise position on this first dimension remains a particular challenge for Canadians, whose lack of consensus about "how much" and "what kind" of diversity has repercussions for the debates, claims and institutional responses defined in the other three dimensions discussed below.