

Managing diversity means building trust

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If elections are won by attacking and discrediting opponents, how will voters know whether the candidates have the capacity to govern this diverse and complex country?

Once in power, the governing party has a duty to govern in the best interests of all citizens and to foster among them a sense of citizenship and belonging. But in Canada, governing for all the people requires dialogue, learning, negotiation and accommodation of interests. Quite a contrast to attack ads.

In the past 10 years, more than two million immigrants have come to Canada in search of a better life. As they make their commitment to Canada, they are changed and so are we. But political discourse pays little attention to ties that bind us together, and political leaders seem to be hard-pressed to define the character of our shared citizenship.

We do pay a lot of attention to immigrant selection. It takes years for most applicants to gain access to Canada. Once they arrive here, however, little attention is paid to the way in which these newcomers acquire a sense of belonging as citizens.

Keith Banting of Queen's University and his colleagues Thomas Courchene and Leslie Seidle point out in a book called *Belonging? Diversity, Recognition and Shared Citizenship in Canada* (published by the Institute for Research on Public Policy last year) that there are two sides to the coin of belonging. The first is recognition of differences so that minorities can express their distinct identities and practices. The second is inclusion, bringing minorities into the mainstream and strengthening the bonds of common community.

What do we expect immigrants to do to become full citizens and what should immigrants expect of the people who were born here? This kind of conversation may be challenging for most of us, but identity politics are not new to Quebec.

Frictions about how immigrants should integrate into Quebec society rose to a crescendo in early 2007, after the small town of Hérouxville issued its controversial code of conduct to “help future residents to integrate more easily.” The preamble stressed that the new arrivals cannot bring the lifestyle of their birth country to Quebec – an idea strongly endorsed by Mario Dumont, Leader of the Action Démocratique du Québec.

This provoked Premier Jean Charest to appoint Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor to lead the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences. The commissioners wrote that: “We have concluded that the foundations of collective life in Quebec are not in a critical situation. What we are facing, instead, is the need to adapt. ... The time has come for compromise, negotiation and balance.”

Their report was widely criticized in Quebec because it insisted that members of the francophone majority must accept that their culture will be transformed, sooner or later, through interaction with ethno-cultural minorities. It also offers useful lessons for the rest of Canada.

The first is to get the facts straight. Commission researchers examined 21 high-profile cases of cultural friction in 2006-07 and found that in 15 of the cases, the perceptions reported in the media were wildly out of line with the facts. To the extent that there had been an issue, it was quietly and effectively managed.

The second lesson is that public institutions such as schools and hospitals in Montreal (and likely in other Canadian cities as well) have become adept at accommodating the needs of ethno-cultural groups in ways that do not impinge on the rights of the majority. For example, should school work be reorganized for Muslim children fasting for Ramadan? Do children with weak language skills need more exam time? Should religious holidays be recognized in the workplace?

Accommodations like these can help to achieve equity and give minorities a sense of belonging and attachment to their country. They achieve both recognition and inclusion.

A third lesson is the urban-rural divide. Alain Giguère, president of CROP Inc., a leading Quebec polling firm, reported in January, 2008, that 93 per cent of francophones who work in a multicultural environment say they have easy contacts with minority co-workers. And 75 per cent support special benefits such as special meals in the cafeteria or time off for religious holidays.

In contrast, 80 per cent of francophones living in the more homogeneous environment outside Montreal are opposed to allowing minorities to wear religious symbols at work and 55 per cent are opposed to special holidays, even if the time lost is made up.

In other words, more contact with minority groups leads to greater acceptance, which in turn enhances our ability to recognize and accommodate differences within the boundaries of legislated rights and responsibilities of citizens. Even the Hérouxville code of conduct emphasized the equality of men and women, for example.

The roles of the political class, then, are:

First, to ensure that basic rights are respected and enforced – creating access to the justice system, fighting discrimination, supporting settlement and language services, and opening up the political system to representatives of minority groups.

Second, to create opportunities for contact and dialogue across ethno-cultural groups – helping Canadians discover how to learn from each other, and how to walk in the other person's shoes.

Managing diversity requires an ability to listen, to learn, to build trust. Attack ads don't get you there.

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