Economic & Political WEEKLY

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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, JUNE 9, 2012, Vol. 47, No. 23 (JUNE 9, 2012), pp. 17-21

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23214913

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Multiculturalism and the Aboriginal Peoples in Canada

H SRIKANTH

The challenges posed by ethnic minorities have compelled many a modern state to accept multiculturalism as state policy. Canada's contributions to development of the theory and practice of multiculturalism are well known. However, within Canada itself there are segments like the aboriginal peoples who consider that multiculturalism does not adequately address their problems, experiences and concerns. Looking at different trajectories that have shaped Canadian multiculturalism, this article throws light on the aboriginal critique of multiculturalism and shows how the indigenous peoples of Canada have been shaping their own future outside the framework of multiculturalism.

The first draft of the article was submitted to the International Conference on "Multiculturalism and Its Discontent: Canada and India", organised by the Indian Association for Canadian Studies at Jodhpur on 29-31 January 2012.

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Of late, there has been a growing recognition that almost all modern states are, in fact, multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-nation states. Earlier in many a country, the dominant nations which held state power followed the policy of assimilation and attempted to homogenise the minorities – the tribals and indigenous peoples, linguistic and religious minorities, and smaller ethnic groups/nations, by imposing a dominant national culture, language and religion. But with different minorities asserting their autonomy and identity, modern states have realised the limitations of the "melting pot" theory. Increasing opposition to assimilation, movements for cultural identity and social justice and struggles for political autonomy/independence have compelled the modern states – western as well as non-western – to respond to the challenges by devising strategies that accommodate the minorities' quest for identity and autonomy within the ambit of the nation state. Multiculturalism is one such conscious intervention espoused to deal with the challenges of growing diversities.

The Canadian Model

Canada was the first country in the world to declare multiculturalism as its official policy. The Canadian policy of multiculturalism intends to eliminate racism and discrimination in all walks of life and guarantee to the minorities the right to maintain and promote their cultural identities. In pursuit of the objectives, a multicultural directorate was constituted in Canada as early as in 1971. Later, a ministry of multiculturalism was created in 1972 to implement and monitor activities in pursuit of multiculturalism. The Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (1985) and the Employment Equity Act (1986) also acknowledged multicultural principles. The multicultural policy received a further boost with the passage of the Multiculturalism Act in 1987. The Act, which provides a legal framework to guide federal responsibilities and activities, makes it obligatory for the Canadian government to work for preserving, enhancing and sharing the multicultural heritage of Canada by eliminating barriers in participation of all individuals and communities in public life. The Act talks of the need to make all social, cultural, economic and political institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character. Several policies, programmes and services are initiated at different levels to assist the socio-economic integration of individuals and communities and promote intercultural understanding through public education and outreach initiatives.[1]

The policy of multiculturalism has helped Canada in so many ways. Apart from reducing ethnic tensions within Canada, the practice of multiculturalism gave a special identity to Canada at the global level. Canadian governments have effectively used multiculturalism to promote Canadian political and business interests abroad. Inspired by the Canadian model, other countries like Australia, the United States (US), Britain and different developing countries have also started endorsing multicultural policies. Multiculturalism has gained considerable support among policy-makers, liberal intellectuals and social activists. It is now viewed as the most democratic and humane way of handling the issues of different kinds of minorities, like immigrants, aboriginal and indigenous peoples, linguistic and religious minorities, etc.

The growing popularity of the theory and practice of multiculturalism should not, however, make one lose sight of its discontents. The conservative critics who disparage multiculturalism for dividing the people and weakening the states are well known.[2] But powerful internal criticism of multiculturalism by those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of official multicultural policies has not received adequate public attention. The aboriginal people are one such community which has found multiculturalism irrelevant to its interests and concerns.

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Although the Multiculturalism Act formally acknowledges the rights of aboriginal people in Canada, the First Nations (Native Canadians/Americans) and the Inuit disassociated themselves from the multiculturalism enunciated by the Canadian state. This article attempts to appreciate the substance and rationale of their critique of multiculturalism and examines their struggles to uphold aboriginal identities and interests.

Historical Trajectories

Canada has always been a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multinational country in the sense that there were different cultural, ethnic and national communities in Canada ever since it came into existence in 1867. But being multicultural and following multiculturalism are not the same. Canada started following multiculturalism as an official policy only from the 1970s onwards. Prior to that, for over a century, Canada tried to assimilate the cultural and ethnic minorities by imposing Anglo-Saxon values and practices. A clear grasp of the history of the first hundred years of Canada's existence is therefore necessary to understand the compulsions that forced the Canadian state to opt for multiculturalism.

Canadian multiculturalism has been influenced by three autonomous, but intersecting historical trajectories. The first significant historical trajectory was obviously the history of Quebec's quest for identity and autonomy. As is well known, Quebec is a Francophone dominant province of Canada. Once a part of New France, it was ceded to the British in 1763, following the Treaty of Paris. Between 1763 and 1867 this ceded territory, initially named as the province of Quebec, was bifurcated into Lower Canada and Upper Canada, only to be merged again to form the province of Canada in 1840.

Factors like attempts to assimilate its French inhabitants into the English mainstream, increasing migration of the British loyalists into the province, and the irreconcilable cultural differences between English and French speaking people necessitated alternative political arrangements in the United Province of Canada. It was at about this period that the British North American colonies, compelled by the threat of American occupation, started exploring the possibility of coming together to form a federation. Although about 40% of the French in the United Province of Canada were then reluctant to join the Canadian federation, political realism compelled the elites of French Canada to lend support to the formation of a federation in anticipation of provincial autonomy to the Francophone dominated province.

The Constitution Act of 1867, also known as the British North America Act, responded positively to the concerns of the Francophone and divided the province of Canada into Ontario and Quebec. Subsequently, both Ontario and Quebec joined other provinces to form the Dominion of Canada.[3] Special provisions were included in the Constitution Act, reassuring Quebec's concerns regarding religion, culture and civic laws.[4] Quebec was guaranteed a fixed number of representatives to the senate and both English and French were declared as official languages of Canada (Denis 1990: 156-59).

Despite such concessions, tensions between the province of Quebec and the rest of Canada continued in one form or the other. There was constant pressure from the French nationalists who advocated Quebec's secession from Canada. The Canadian government sought to make concessions to accommodate the Quebecois by constituting the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1960s and concluding the Meech Lake Accord in 1980s.[5] These two interventions, conceived primarily to attend to the needs of the French Canadians, did, in fact, effect two landmark decisions in the history of Canada – the first one led to the formal declaration of Multicultural Policy in 1971 and the latter to the promulgation of Multiculturalism Act in 1987.

The changing demographic composition of Canada is the second important historical trajectory that influenced Canada to accept multiculturalism. Post-second world war Canada can no more be viewed as a binational state. Apart from the English and the French speaking people, Canada is inhabited by several other immigrant ethnic communities. There has been a steady flow of immigrants to Canada from different parts of the globe, initially from Europe and then from different developing countries. Till the 1950s the preference was for immigration from Europe. Concessions were given to white immigrants who wish to settle down as agriculturalists.

The situation was not so favourable for Chinese and other coloured immigrants who were employed as semi-skilled and unskilled labourers. They experienced several hardships and racial discrimination for decades. During the period between the first and the second world wars, even immigrants from the southern and eastern Europe were discriminated on the grounds of nationality and ethnicity. However, after the second world war, the economic situation began to improve in Canada. Because of the stagnation in birth rate of white Canadian population and fall in immigration from Europe, Canada had to liberalise its immigration policy in the 1960s in its own economic interest. Accordingly, giving up the racial and ethnic bias, the Canadian government came out with a point system in 1967 and opened up immigration opportunities for people from developing countries.[6]

Consequently, the immigrant population from non-European countries, who were officially recognised as "visible ethnic minorities", began to increase considerably. The 2006 Census showed that people from more than 200 ethnic origins have made Canada their home. *Statistics Canada* predicts that by 2031, between 25% and 28% of Canada's population will be foreign born, and between 29% and 32% will belong to a visible minority group. It also projects that by 2031, non-Christian religious communities will represent approximately 14% of Canada's total population.[7] Given the growing ethnic and racial diversities, there was every possibility of an outbreak of ethnic tensions in Canada, as in other western countries. The Canadian state had to pre-empt such possibilities. Further, it was realised that the ethnic immigrants can contribute positively to the Canadian economy, if only they felt secure in the alien land and were treated as equals with others. More so, it is understood that the ethnic immigrants who come to

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Canada in search of greener pastures continue to cling to their cultural roots. There is no way that these immigrants could be assimilated forcibly into the dominant national culture(s) of Canada. Apart from the internal factors, Canada had to respond to the changing international scenario that followed the success of anti-colonial struggles and the birth of new states.

The number of sovereign countries under non-white leaders has increased substantially in the United Nations and in the Commonwealth. Subsequent to decolonisation different international covenants on human rights were approved during this period. The racist approach in the changed conditions is unviable and even reactionary. Given these realities, in its own interests, Canada was to follow multiculturalism that accepts diversities and looks at them not as a drawback, but as assets to be harnessed to make rich the cultural heritage of Canada.

The third trajectory that influenced multiculturalism in Canada was the rise of aboriginal movements. Looking at the English and the French as founding nations tends to ignore the historical fact that prior to European colonisation, North America was inhabited by several indigenous aboriginal communities. The colonial settlers built modern states in Americas by defeating, displacing and subjugating the aboriginal communities. Canada was no exception. The indigenous aboriginal communities, who at the time of contact were recognised by the British empire as "sovereign nations", lost their lands and their independence to the colonial settlers.

The advent of Canada did not bring any qualitative change to the aboriginal peoples, who became the wards of the federal government of Canada and were confined mostly to reserves. Despite its commitment to liberal democracy, Canada denied equal citizenship to the indigenous aboriginal communities until 1950. Conscious attempts were made to deface aboriginal identities and assimilate the aboriginal communities through residential schools and religious conversions. Against the centuries of oppression and discrimination, the indigenous peoples began to organise themselves into different associations to fight for their aboriginal rights. Their movements did in a way influence the policy of multiculturalism in Canada.

When the Canadian government talks of ensuring security, equal opportunities and identities of all racial and ethnic communities, it meant not only the "visible immigrant minorities", but also the aboriginal population. The Multiculturalism Act, in fact, does talk of the need to acknowledge aboriginal rights. Some of the activities taken up under multicultural programme involve the aboriginal peoples also. The Canadian government would be more than happy had the native peoples accepted the state multicultural policies. But for certain compelling reasons, the aboriginal peoples of Canada refused to be covered under the Canadian multicultural policy.

Aboriginal People's Response

The aboriginal response to multiculturalism differs from country to country. The aboriginal people in Australia disassociated themselves from multiculturalism. The native activists and their supporters in Australia view the philosophy and politics of multiculturalism as a threat to the interests of the indigenous peoples.[8] In some Latin American countries the aboriginal people made use of multicultural policies to promote their interests.[9] Canada finds itself between the two extremes. The aboriginal peoples of Canada were not so open in their rejection of multiculturalism like their counterparts in Australia, but they did make it clear that they do not own multiculturalism as their programme.

The federal government of Canada, despite occasional reference to aboriginal peoples in their documents on multiculturalism, emphasises more what it calls "ethnic visible minorities", officially meaning non-white, non-European immigrants. Naturally, the aboriginal people in Canada decline to identify themselves as minority ethnic groups and refuse to become a part of the mosaic that the state multiculturalism seeks to build. In their view, multiculturalism has more to do with the interests of the immigrant ethnic communities than the interests and concerns of the indigenous people.[10] They argue that unlike immigrant minorities, who came to Canada in search of greener pastures, the aboriginal peoples are the original/first settlers who lived in the continent prior to European colonisation. In their view, the dominant focus of multiculturalism overlooks the history of European invasions and the colonial subjugation of the First Peoples.

The deprivations and subjugations that the indigenous peoples have experienced under colonial powers are not experienced by any other minorities in the country. Naturally, their concerns and demands are very different from those of ethnic immigrant minorities. The guarantee of formal equality and granting of citizenship rights do not satisfy aboriginal people. The natives assert their right to self-determination and seek recognition of their identity as aboriginal peoples – as First Nations, as Inuit and as Metis. They claim ancestral title over large tracks of land and natural resources forcibly taken over by the colonial/Canadian governments representing the settlers' interests (Sanders 1985: 292-303).

Aboriginal perceptions and claims at times contradict liberal democratic tenets of individualism, freedom and rule of law. The state-sponsored multiculturalism finds few takers among the indigenous peoples. For, they feel that multiculturalism hides the practice of racialism and does not deal with the issues of inequalities of power and resources. They believe that multiculturalism only gives formal recognition to pluralities.

Whatever be its positive contributions, the law under liberal democracy continues to remain mono-cultural and common law cannot rise above the existing dominant culture. The native leaders and activists point out that the Canadian claims to multiculturalism did not prevent the state declaring the English and the French as founding nations. They ask why the Meech Lake Accord which recognised the Quebecois as a distinct nation hesitates to assign a similar status to the indigenous peoples (Cairns 1988). Further, they see multiculturalism as a ploy to deny special status to the aboriginal peoples and pit other citizens against the indigenous peoples, by projecting the aboriginals as ethno-centric and chauvinist.

Some scholars sympathetic to aboriginal peoples point out that by projecting

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everyone – including the indigenous peoples as settlers, the advocates of multiculturalism veil antagonistic ethnic and racial interactions that characterise Canadian history till the second world war. Some scholars see multiculturalism as a strategy to manage ethnic and racial differences in the Canadian society.

In her work, Freda Hawkins (1982: 77) shows that the Canadian multiculturalism was not an outcome of change in the mindset of the majority population, but the result of pragmatic considerations of the Canadian bureaucrats and policymakers, who sought a new strategy to manage diversities in the changed national and international context. Himani Bannerji in her critical work argues that multiculturalism does not merely recognise, but actually constitutes new differences to ensure white supremacy in Canadian society (Bannerji 2000). Carrying this argument further, Sunera Thobani argued that with the constitution of people of colour as politically identifiable "Other", race will be reconfigured as culture and cultural identity will be crystallised as political identity (Thobani 2007: 145).

Even scholars like Lance W Roberts and Rodney A Clifton conclude that Canadian multiculturalism tilts towards symbolic multiculturalism and gives lower priority to "institutionalised multiculturalism", which requires "a sufficiently developed social structure to perpetuate cultural heritage" (Roberts and Clifton 1990: 120-39). Charles R Hale also says that multicultural state does not merely stop at "recognising" community, civil society, indigenous culture and the like, but "actively reconstitutes them in its own image, sheering them of radical excesses, inciting them to do the work of subject-formation that otherwise would fall to the state itself" (Hale 2002: 485-524).

Reconciliation

In view of such criticisms and objections raised against multiculturalism by aboriginal activists and supporters, the Canadian state chose not to project multiculturalism as a solution to the problems of the aboriginal peoples. Militant First Nations movements in Canada seeking recognition of aboriginal rights also forced the Canadian government to recognise the specificity of the aboriginal question. Formation of aboriginal networks across the globe and the recognition of the rights of the indigenous peoples by international organisations such as the United Nations, the International Labour Organisation and the World Bank also compel liberal democratic countries like Canada to respond positively and responsibly.

Unlike the ethnic immigrants, who are content with equal citizenship and just treatment, the indigenous peoples of Canada aspire for recognition of special rights as indigenous peoples. They have been raising demands for upholding historic treaties, or signing of new treaties; for restoration of aboriginal lands and territories; for control over natural resources, for autonomous self-governments and for protecting their aboriginal identity and cultural rights (Sanders 1985: 532).

Responding to the aboriginal concerns and movements, the Canadian state started taking positive steps from the 1970s onwards. The Constitution Act, 1982 recognised Native Indians, Inuit and Metis as aboriginal people and affirmed that their rights as aboriginal people predate the Canadian constitution. Section 35.1 of the constitution made it obligatory for the Canadian government to consult the representatives of aboriginal peoples while proposing amendments to aboriginal rights and freedom.

On their part, the Canadian courts have taken up the aboriginal cause by recognising natives' right to land and other treaty rights. For example, in *Calder vs British Columbia* case (1973), the Supreme Court of Canada recognised the existence of aboriginal title to lands that had not been surrendered to the crown. In *Delgamuukw vs British Columbia* (1997), the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that aboriginal people enjoy the right of exclusive use and occupation of territory if they can demonstrate that they have occupied the land prior to the assertion of British sovereignty, and that there has been continuity in the possession between the present- and pre-sovereignty occupation. In the *R vs Sparrow* case (1990), the Supreme Court stated that the federal government could limit or infringe upon a right of aboriginal people only if there existed a good reason for the law, and only if the law interfered with the aboriginal right in the least intrusive way possible. Failing to do so, the law would be deemed unconstitutional.

Responding to the court decisions, the Canadian government took initiatives to conclude self-governments with different aboriginal communities. Mention may be made here of the Sechelt Indian Band Self-Government Act, Westbank First Nation Self-government Agreement, and James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. Similarly, the government has been negotiating land agreements with different Inuit and First Nation communities. In provinces like British Columbia, initiatives have been taken to negotiate new treaties with various First Nation

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communities. Apart from addressing such basic issues, federal and provincial governments in Canada have initiated several policies and programmes for the aboriginal peoples in matters relating to education, employment, law and order, housing, health, culture, etc. Although these initiatives may be felt inadequate to undo the historical injustice done to the aboriginal peoples, the aboriginal policy definitely did help in addressing some of the vital issues concerning the aboriginal lives in Canada (Srikanth 2010: 101-39).

Conclusions

Multiculturalism is both a philosophical and political response to the problems caused by increasing diversities and ethnic tensions in the modern states. Most liberal democracies in the world, including Canada, acknowledge the need for overcoming racial and ethnic prejudices that once characterised the state policies towards the minorities. However, the fact that these states have to work within the liberal-capitalist framework imposes limitations on how far multiculturalism could go in addressing to the problems of different minorities in these countries. The critics have pointed out that the liberal state cannot go beyond "symbolic multiculturalism" and given the imperatives of the market economy, it is not possible to ensure institutional multiculturalism, which could give viable structural bases for the survival of different ethnic cultures. The aboriginal criticism of multiculturalism echoes many of these points.

Aboriginal people in Canada were not content with a multicultural agenda ensuring citizenship and identity to all minorities. They show little interest in multiculturalism, as it fails to acknowledge the specificity of aboriginal history and uniqueness of their identity. They realise that their interests as aboriginal people cannot be protected by becoming a part of the salad bowl. Hence from the beginning, aboriginal people in Canada fought for their rights outside the framework of multiculturalism. Of course, they realise that in the changed national and international context, it is not possible to attain political independence. So they seek maximum autonomy within the Canadian framework through treaties. They understand that genuine autonomy could be ensured only by having control over land and resources to sustain their economy and culture.

Over the years, the Canadian state has also realised that it is not possible to tie down aboriginal people within the multicultural framework. Hence, it has evolved an aboriginal policy of its own and responded to the aboriginal demands for land, resource control, treaties and self-government. It is through comprehensive a aboriginal policy, and not through multiculturalism, that Canada is able to deal with the apprehensions and aspirations of the aboriginal peoples. It is true that such an aboriginal policy also cannot transcend the liberal capitalist framework. Yet, compared to the much publicised multicultural strategy, a sensible and sensitive aboriginal policy has the capacity to win over the confidence of the aboriginal people.

NOTES

1 For Canadian official view on multiculturalism and multicultural programme, see "Multiculturalism", Citizenship and Immigration Canada website, http://www.cic.qc.ca/english/multiculturalism/index.asp, accessed on 12 November 2011; see also, "About the Multicultural Programme", Citizenship and Immigration Canada website, http://www.cic.qc.ca/english/multiculturalism/multi.asp, accessed 13 January 2012.

2 For conservative criticism of multiculturalism, refer, Garcea (2008: 141-60); Ryan (2010); Blainey (1984); Huntington (2004); D'Souza (1998); Schlesinger (1998); Cameron McKenzie, "The Menace of Multiculturalism", 1997, http://www.gwb.com.au/gwb/news/pc/multi3.htm, accessed 25 April 2012.

3 Claude Bélanger, "Quebec and the Confederation Project (1864-67)", Marianopolis College website, http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/quebechistory/readings/queconf.htm accessed 13 January 2012.

4 Claude Bélanger, "Quebec, the Constitution and Special Status", Mariaopolis College website, http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/quebechistory/readings/special.htm, accessed on 13 January 2012.

5 Evelyn Kallen, "The Meech Lake Accord: Entrenching a Pecking Order of Minority Rights", *Canadian Public Policy*, 14 September 1988): S107-S120. Available online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/3551221, accessed 27 December 2011.

6 For critical understanding of the history of immigration in Canada see Hawkins (1988); also Elliott and Flearas (1990: 51-76).

7 For official statistics on non-white ethnic minorities in Canada, see "Visible Ethnic Minorities", *Canadian Stat*, website, http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11, accessed 12 January 2012.

8 Dunn and Kamp (2011: 19-31); Merlan (2005: 473-94), available online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/ 25064895, accessed 29 October 2011.

9 Povinelli (2002); Calma (2008); Merlan (2005: 473-49).

10 Joanne Heritz, "Indigenous Peoples Escaping Multiculturalism" (paper submitted to CPSA Conference, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, 16 to 18 May 2011). Available online at http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2011/Heritz.pdf, accessed 25 April 2012.

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