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# Europe's "retreat" from multiculturalism:
# Rhetoric and practice

**Editor's Note:** Across Europe, the term multiculturalism has been used to describe a range of sometimes divergent responses to immigrants and the presence of ethno-cultural diversity. In recent years, some European political leaders have famously declared multiculturalism "dead" – suggesting wide spread retreat from the policy. But the evidence of the Multiculturalism Policy Index tells a different story. In April 2012, Keith Banting sat down with Global Centre for Pluralism to discuss his research on the meaning of Europe's apparent retreat from "multiculturalism" and the gap between rhetoric and practice.

### What is the Multiculturalism Policy Index?

The Index is a research tool we developed to try and rank or measure the strength of multiculturalism policies across Western democracies. We developed this tool because we found that the debate about multiculturalism was growing more intense, and people were using the word in different ways, and were making very bold claims about what was happening without a lot of evidence. And so we developed this tool, this ranking system, to develop a more precise measure of the extent to which different countries have adopted multiculturalism policies. We chose eight indicators, or eight types of policies, which we thought were at the core of the debate. We then spent numerous hours – or our research assistants spent numerous hours – going through the documentary evidence on 21 countries, getting the evidence on the extent to which they had adopted those policies. We produced an overall ranking of the strength of multiculturalism policies, demonstrating that some countries had gone down the road towards multiculturalism policies over the years, and some countries had chosen not to. But I think for the first time, we had a more serious, concrete measure of the strength and the differences between countries.

**Europe and Canada perceive "multiculturalism" quite differently. What accounts for the difference?**

Well, I think there are several important differences. You have to start with the nature of the immigration flows in the two cases. In the Canadian case, we have had a much longer history of immigration. This is a historic country of immigration. It's been built, in effect, by immigrants, and so there is a historical comfort level with the level of immigration. There's also the fact that our policies have tended to select for higher levels of education and training in immigrants. And therefore, immigrants have had a better record than, certainly in Europe, of moving into the labour force and becoming self-sustaining and productive members of society – people who contribute to the country effectively. We've had some difficulties more recently in that regard, and immigration policy is being adjusted. But certainly compared to Europe, we have had a more successful process of integrating newcomers into the economic and social mainstream.

And then I think the final big difference about Canada compared to some other countries is that we have developed, I think, a more open conception of our basic identity – who we are as a people – partly because of the historic nature of the country, the fact that we have never had one single culture. We've always been a kind of combination of different peoples: Quebec, First Nations, people whose heritage was originally from the UK. From the very beginning, the country had multiple peoples here and multiple cultures. As a consequence it was easier perhaps for us to have an identity that was more inclusive, not to have a tightly defined sense of who we are. So immigrants when they came didn't have to leap over as many cultural hurdles, I think. So these three things in combination made us more comfortable with immigration than some countries have been.

**The Netherlands has rejected multiculturalism. Is its experience typical of Europe or is something else going on?**

Well, it's a complicated story in Europe, and our Multiculturalism Policy Index is actually very helpful here. If you look at the nature of public debate, political debates, academic debates, if you look at the way people talk about multiculturalism, there's clearly been a pervasive retreat or backlash against multiculturalism. But if you actually look at policies in these countries, if you look at the actual programs that have been put in place to recognize, support, legitimate cultural differences, there's been relatively little change. The Netherlands actually turns out to be quite an exception to the overall trend in Europe. It's one of the very few countries, which has actually taken out, uprooted, multiculturalism policies that have been put in place

by an earlier generation. In contrast, most of Europe has either maintained the policies they put in place, or in some cases expanded them. On average, multiculturalism policies have gotten stronger over the last decade, a decade in which public debate actually attacked multiculturalism. So there's a kind of odd disjunction between the debate on the one hand and the policies on the other.

**Some European observers contend that multiculturalism and civic integration are incompatible. Would you agree?**

Not necessarily. I would argue that the Canadian policy package actually combines multiculturalism and what the Europeans now call "civic integration". We have policies in place which support cultural diversity, which celebrate the diversity of Canada. Indeed, it's one of the central features of how we define ourselves. We are diverse, and we think that's an appropriate kind of society to live in.

But we also expect and support what the Europeans call "civic integration", which is a process of making sure that newcomers move into the mainstream of society, that they move into the economy, that they increasingly embrace the liberal democratic process of government, and the conceptions of equality between men and women, and so on. Integration is an emphasis in our naturalization policies. We expect newcomers to learn not just our languages, but also our history, our culture, our geography, our political institutions. And so in the Canadian context, we've joined multiculturalism and civic integration into a single package.

So I think they can be made to work together, but they will only work together well if the approach to civic integration is gentle, is liberal, and facilitates movement of newcomers, rather than punitive in the treatment of newcomers when they arrive.

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Keith Banting

Dr. Banting holds the Queen's Research Chair in Public Policy at Queen's University, Kingston, Canada. His current research focuses on ethnic diversity, multiculturalism and the welfare state. In this field, he is co-editor (with Will Kymlicka) of *Multiculturalism and the Welfare State: Recognition and Redistribution in Contemporary Democracies* (Oxford University Press, 2006), and co-editor (with Thomas Courchene and Leslie Seidle) of *Belonging? Diversity, Recognition and Shared Citizenship in Canada* (Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2007). He is the co-director, along with Will Kymlicka, of the Multiculturalism Policy Index project, which monitors the evolution of multiculturalism policies across the Western democracies.

**Multiculturalism Policy Index**

The Multiculturalism Policy Index project is designed to provide information about multiculturalism policies in a standardized format that aids comparative research and contributes to the understanding of state-minority relations.

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