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Multiculturalism: European and Canadian experiences

Editor's Note: Multiculturalism is a term with many different meanings. Originally developed in Canada as policy of recognition, over the last 40 years multiculturalism has evolved into a citizenship policy for ensuring the inclusion and equality of all Canadians, irrespective of national origin. In Europe, the term has been used to describe a range of sometimes divergent responses to the presence of ethno-cultural diversity in previously homogeneous



societies. But in recent years, some European political leaders have declared multiculturalism “dead”. In April 2012, Will Kymlicka sat down with Global Centre for Pluralism to discuss his research on the changing perceptions of “multiculturalism” in Europe and its relationship to the Canadian approach.

You argue there is a gap between rhetoric and policy in Europe's recent “retreat” from multiculturalism. What do you mean?

When multiculturalism policies were first adopted in Europe in the 1970s or so, they were accompanied by a mood of optimism. They had a certain kind of celebratory quality to them. The hope was that if societies made an effort to recognize and accommodate diversity this would lead to greater harmony and to a more successful society. A lot of that optimism has really disappeared over the last 10 or 15 years in Europe, and there's a much greater sense of insecurity around issues of immigration and integration. At the very hard edge, there's kind of radical anti-immigrant populist parties, but even in the middle of the political spectrum, there's much more anxiety and pessimism. That celebratory and optimistic mood has disappeared. One form that it's taken is this very rhetorical attack on multiculturalism. People blame multiculturalism for having been naïve about the challenges of diversity, and for not having recognized the real problems that can arise in integrating immigrants. So

we've had a rhetorical backlash against multiculturalism as being naïve, but it hasn't actually led to the retraction of multiculturalism policies in most European countries. Instead, this new feeling of fear has manifested itself in a different set of public policies around what's called "civic integration". The European countries are managing their fear around issues of immigration not actually by cutting back on multiculturalism policies, but by adding these often quite coercive and paternalistic policies to promote integration.

Several new discourses have emerged to address diversity issues in Europe. Do these changes in terminology matter?

I think it does. It's part of the rhetorical retreat from multiculturalism. People have been looking for another term to discuss issues of diversity, and so people talk about diversity policies, rather than multiculturalism policies, or about interculturalism, or about integration policies, or social cohesion. A number of different terms have been used. At one level, the change in terminology doesn't matter that much because it hasn't necessarily changed the underlying policies at a kind of grassroots level. But at another level, I think the change in discourse does matter, because as I said before, the shift in discourse is a reflection of a real shift in mood from optimism to anxiety and feelings of insecurity and fear. And immigrant groups are very aware that they're now viewed with much greater suspicion and distrust, and that makes them more ambivalent about their role in society, and much more uncertain about how they're perceived. And so, even though some of these original multiculturalism policies are still in place, the fact that they're being surrounded by this more pessimistic anxiety is, I think, actually making those policies less successful. They were intended to encourage and welcome immigrants, but although the policies are still there, because they're surrounded by this discourse of anxiety and fear, they've not being as welcoming as they were intended to be.

Is it worth fighting to preserve the term "multiculturalism"?

I think that in some countries it's probably too late to try to save the term multiculturalism. The first retreat from multiculturalism came primarily from right wing parties, who, one could argue, were never very sympathetic to multiculturalism to begin with. But over the last 10 years, even the center and center left parties in much of Europe – social democratic parties, for example – have retreated from the discourse of multiculturalism. The Labour government in Britain is an example. It had championed multiculturalism, but then under Blair it shifted away, and there were quite explicit instructions given to government ministers not to use the word

“multiculturalism”. And in that context, where both the center left and the right have rejected the term, it’s become a kind of taboo word. It’s as if it’s a term of abuse almost in political rhetoric in some European countries. And I think that’s unfortunate, but it’s now hard to reverse. If you continue to identify yourself as a defender of multiculturalism, you’re almost immediately marginalized in the public debate. And so if you care about diversity, it’s better to find some other way to articulate your claims.

But I don’t think we’re in that situation in Canada. I think that, in terms of their official platforms, all the major national political parties remain in favour of multiculturalism. Public opinion polls show that it still has fairly high levels of popular support. And so, in my view, in Canada – and I think the same would be true in Australia, for example – multiculturalism remains a word with positive connotations, and that we can still use it for good work.

Does Canada’s approach to multiculturalism offer insights for Europe?

It’s certainly not possible to just transplant the Canadian model to Europe. We have a very different history of immigration, but also a very different immigrant selection process. We select our immigrants based on the point system, which means that we select by and large very skilled immigrants – more so really than almost any country in the world. We pick the cream of the crop in terms of immigrants. And so it’s not surprising that we’ve had more success in the integration of immigrants because they come with higher levels of skill and of education. In contrast, many of the immigrants in Europe were originally guest workers and relatively unskilled. European countries also have large numbers of essentially refugee asylum seekers from North Africa, or from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. And so they face challenges in integrating a very different group of immigrants than we have.

But one lesson I think that Canada does have is that it shows that you can combine a commitment to multiculturalism with a strong commitment to citizenship and to national belonging. I mean this is something I think that Canada has actually been quite good at. We do quite strongly promote multiculturalism, and the recognition of diversity and the accommodation of diversity, but at the same time we very much encourage immigrants to identify with the country, to feel that they are Canadian. And they do come to have a very strong sense of belonging to Canada, very high levels of pride. For example, immigrants and their children show very high levels of pride in Canada, but also we’ve connected multiculturalism with citizenship. Multiculturalism isn’t just about preserving particular cultural practices in the private sphere. Our conception of multiculturalism is one that encourages people to contribute to the society as a whole, and to participate in society as a whole. So

multiculturalism is a way of being Canadian, and it's a way of exercising one's Canadian citizenship. And I think that package of multicultural citizenship is actually a very powerful and attractive one.

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Dr. Kymlicka is the Canada Research Chair in Political Philosophy in the Philosophy Department at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, where he has taught since 1998. His research interests focus on issues of democracy and diversity, and in particular on models of citizenship and social justice within multicultural societies. He has published eight books and over 200 articles, which have been translated into 32 languages, and has received several awards, most recently the 2009 Premier's Discovery Award in the Social Sciences. He is the co-director, along with Keith Banting, 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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