



## **The Fragility of Pluralism**

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Until recently, Canada and Quebec were regarded as successful cases of pluralistic societies on religious and cultural fronts. However, for some years, harsh criticism of Canadian multiculturalism has been heard from some European countries. During the debate in Ontario on possible amendments to marriage law, ominous echoes of Islamophobia surfaced. This same Islamophobia was expressed in our debate on the wretched Charter of Values.

Do these issues cancel out initially favourable impressions? I think not. Both of our societies have very respectable and significant achievements in this area. Viewed from a global perspective, they are far from meriting a negative verdict. However, these incidents reveal the fragility of our success, modest though it may be. This fragility is inherent in democracy itself. Why?

Because democracy requires greater cohesion than authoritarian regimes. It requires a shared sense of belonging, solidarity, and mutual trust. This shared identity is formed around certain valued traits. These generally have ethical (we form a democratic society) and historico-ethnic (we are German, French, Danish) aspects.

Yet, this definition always has the potential to become a motivator for undue exclusion. Some groups may be seen as strangers to "us," legitimate citizens. They are either from the wrong ethnic group or culture or suspected of breaching common ethics, or both. Take for example Irish immigrants who arrived in the United States in the 1840s. They were seen as "papists" who had no place in the Protestant culture that was the new republic.

Today, the Irish are fully integrated in the United States, but a lot of Americans harbour the same suspicions about recent Hispanic immigrants. This situation is a good illustration of the fragility of democratic pluralism. We get used to living together in a certain cluster of groups, but when

another arrives through immigration or when locals make new claims, a majority is likely to feel a deep discomfort. This majority is therefore tempted to adopt exclusion measures.

Accordingly, in Quebec and the rest of Canada, we had long been used to living among Catholics, Protestants and Jews. When "new" religions started moving in, anxiety and suspicion arose. This is particularly true with Islam, especially in the current geopolitical context.

In such circumstances, adopting inclusion standards in principle is not enough. They can be quite strong in a context of familiar differences, but in the face of deviations that were heretofore unexpected, reactions of discomfort or even fear can lead us to betray our principles.

This is what has happened in recent years in Quebec. This situation may incite energy and creativity or lead to withdrawal and anxiety. The bad news is that we cannot indefinitely continue to have a shared identity fuelled by our past. This identity must be redefined to find common ground for a changing people—not just once, but repeatedly.

However, this can also be seen as good news, as an invitation to promote renewal. This turn toward the future is in the spirit of interculturalism, as suggested by Gérard Bouchard, among others. In this Quebec of the future, each new cohort, in its entirety, will prepare a new host society for its successors.