

CHARTING THE COURSE:
*Examining the Policies and Values that
Define Canadian Identity*

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It is common perception that Canadian identity is an elusive entity. Some people have argued that there is no Canadian identity, that it is lost in the confused globalized environment, muddled by multiculturalism, incomprehensible because of Canada's two official languages, and threatened by Quebec separatism. Arguably, however, people are too quick to judgement, lamenting the loss of something that still has yet to be fully formed. The mere idea of the Canadian nation, as opposed to the Canadian state, has yet to fully take concrete form in the minds of the citizenry. Canadians have become so blinded by the diversity around them, that they fail to see the underlying values that define Canadian identity, fortified through the institutions of Canadian citizenship. Arguably, it is through the public recognition in the significance of the institutions and instruments within legal framework of citizenship such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and multiculturalism, that the notion of the Canadian nation can take stronger hold, and the development of a distinctly Canadian identity be recognized.

In arguing that citizenship is fundamental to the development of national identity, it is first necessary to understand the significance of the term 'the nation.' The first thing to consider is the fact that a nation consists of both objective and subjective elements. In terms of its subjectivity, the nation is "a particular kind of abstract community, abstract in the dominant level of its integration, in the mode of its subjectivities, as well as in the symbolic representation of that relationship. It is an abstract community, but one which always, subjectively and ideologically, reaches back to more concrete ways of living and representation" (James 2). This is to say that a nation is one of the most broadly defined forms of human community, in part because of its usually large size, and because of particular social and political purposes. Miller points out that "nations are not things that exist in the world independently of the beliefs people have about them" (17). The qualities that define a particular nation are as general as possible to give people a sense of community with fellow 'nationals.' In this respect, Anderson's definition of a nation as an 'imagined community' is applicable; "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6).

This 'imagined community' is in part the result of the historical circumstances that forced, in some way, the need for a collective consciousness that extended beyond one's neighborhood and town, giving the nation its objective characteristics. Miller's definition of the nation is applicable here as he describes it as "a community (1) constituted by shared belief and mutual commitment, (2) extended in history, (3) active in character, (4) connected to a particular territory, and (5) marked off from other communities by its distinct public culture" (27). By shared belief, Miller means there exists a kind of recognition of "one another as compatriots, and believe that they share characteristics of the relevant kind" (22). Miller also notes the importance of a common history which defines the nation in time, and "because it stretches back and forward across the generations, is not one that the present generation can renounce" (24). By active character, Miller means that the nation is a community that "becomes what it is by the decisions that it takes" (24). By common territory and distinct public culture, Miller emphasizes the fact that nations have a given territory and that their existence in a particular place is not an accident (25). Most people would consider these elements the hallmarks of a nation, but arguably a nation is more than just the sum of its parts.

Ultimately, the significance of the nation is that it forms a kind of human identity where people feel a sense of belonging. In short, "identity is a state of mind" (Howard-Hassmann 534). This sense of belonging, however, is not the same as other forms of identity which are rooted in concrete, objective qualities. It is a type of identity that requires individual agreement, in part because "national identities are, in a strong and destructive sense, mythical" (Miller 33). National identity is mythical in the sense that it "interpret events in a particular way, and also in so far as they amplify the significance of some events and diminish the significance of others" (Miller 38). However, the key to national identity, and arguably the agreed existence of the nation is the fact that it can "contribute significantly to the support of valuable social relations" (36).

It is within this understanding the nation as a source of identity that the significance of citizenship becomes apparent. Citizenship, as a legal and political entity, links a nation with a state, a national community with a distinct political institution. It is a "political idea [that] has a history. It is a by-product of the invention of the national state" (Jenson 631). In the process, citizenship "defines the population to whom the state owes protection...To be a citizen means to enjoy certain rights and obligations, guaranteed by the state" (Jenson 628). Particular national values are put into practice through the granting of particular rights, which include, "the civil element of citizenship...composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom...the political part of citizenship consist[ing] of the right to participate in the exercise of political power...[and] the social element of citizenship [which] is made up of a right to the prevailing standard of life and the social heritage of the society" (Barbalet 6). Citizenship rights include, not only basic human rights, but also particular legal, social and political protections the nation deems significant. Jenson gives the definition of citizenship as a regime that "includes: the institutional arrangements, rules and understandings that guide and shape state policy; problem definition employed by states and citizens; and the range of claims recognized as legitimate" (631). These rights, which can be defined as civil, political and social rights "invest the concept of citizenship with power" by providing a means to establish, maintain and develop ones "identity and virtue" (Heater 182). Thus, in modern nation-states, the links between identity and citizenship are deep, giving the nation the opportunity to express important, distinctive values.

Within the Canadian context, identity has arguably been developed through the development of various distinctly Canadian institutions dating back to Confederation. As

Resnick argues, “English Canadian nationalism was itself the slowly developing by-product of a state structure whose origins can be traced to 1867” (210). These legal institutions were created over time and included

nation-building activities associated with crown corporations such as the Canadian National Railways, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and Trans-Canada Airlines; with the sense of national solidarity associated with the social activities of the state—old age pensions, unemployment insurance, and family allowances; and from the symbolism of post-1945 Canadian nationalism—the Canadian Citizenship Act (1947), the abolition of appeals to the Privy Council (1949), naming of Canadians to the position of governor general (1952 and on), creation of the Canada Council (1965), Expo '67, and the patriation of the Canadian constitution (1982) (Resnick 211).

One could also include political developments such as the Official Languages Act, and the Multiculturalism Act as elements that emphasized particular values that were important in forging an inclusive and distinct national identity.

Through the development of the key Canadian institutions over the past 60 years or so, particular values have come to define Canadian identity. The establishment of explicitly Canadian institutions, such as Canadian citizenship, Canadian social welfare programs, and the building of Canadian industries, began the process of imbedding the values of independence, self-sufficiency, and courage into the Canadian consciousness. The institution of the Official Languages Act, the Multiculturalism Policy and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has encouraged the profound values of equality, freedom, compassion, understanding, tolerance and respect. Thus, ultimately, Canadian identity is “characterized by choice” (Howard-Hassmann 527). While these may not be purely Canadian virtues, it is the way these values have manifested themselves that makes them distinctly Canadian.

Given the establishment of many Canadian institutions, and the implicit values those have instilled into the Canadian consciousness, they are not without their critics. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, for example, while seen as a “key symbol of national unity, an inviolate set of values that is now fundamental to Canadians’ understanding of what it means to be Canadian,” has been seen by some as an “Americanization of our legal and political systems, as well as our political culture” (Jhappan 348-349). Jhappan notes the criticisms, which range from calling the Charter anti-democratic, because it gives “special interests” the ability to lobby their demands in court, to being a “dangerous” document because it “includes certain rights at the expense of others” and gives the courts judiciary powers that overrule legislative authority of the government (351). Arguably, however, these criticisms are more worry than reality. While it is true that the Charter is similar to some of the basic provisions in the American Constitution, it has nonetheless given Canadians a distinctly Canadian document from which to refer to, with respect to their rights and freedoms. Also, with respect to some of the rights in the Charter, while it may be true that it gives some rights at the expense of others, it does so for the purpose of equalizing the opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups of Canadian society, such as minorities. Finally, with respect to the issue over the power of the judiciary, Jhappan reiterates the fact that “the Charter has three built-in sources of limitation, including sections 1 and 33, [which] recognizes the policy-making authority of legislatures even if their policies violate Charter guarantees...The fact of the matter is that courts must interpret the law as it stands” (355). Thus, while the Charter has transformed the nature of the legal and political system in

Canada, it has done so, not at the expense of Canadian tradition, but to foster an even stronger one by providing a distinctly Canadian legal framework that strengthens the values of Canadian independence, self-sufficiency, and courage. Canadians can truly be considered ‘strong and free’ by having its own document listing all their rights and freedoms, and the means to defend themselves in the face of injustice.

Perhaps the most controversial Canadian policy is multiculturalism, which greatly broadened the definition of Canadian identity. Beginning in 1971 with the multiculturalism policy, and later instituted into law in 1988, Canadian multiculturalism is a policy that “describes our polyethnic and racial mosaic, articulat[ing] a vision of cultural pluralism which many feel is suitable for the Canadian reality” (Wilson 651). It has evolved to become an instrument of the values of equality, tolerance, and acceptance within Canadian society; “it calls, first for the action of societal decision-makers to recognize a social reality (polyethnicity) within their midst, and secondly, to articulate both a *vision* and a *policy* devised to achieve some basis for tolerance and mutual respect” (Wilson 653). It gives Canadian minorities the opportunity to have “confidence in their own individual identity and place in the Canadian mosaic” (655). As Pierre Trudeau said in the House of Commons, “National unity, if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be found on confidence in one’s own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes, and assumptions. A vigorous policy of multiculturalism will help create this *initial* confidence” (8545, my emphasis).

Many people have been strongly critical of multiculturalism. Like the criticisms against the Charter, many saw multiculturalism as a death-blow to the maintenance and further development of Canadian identity;

In summary, multiculturalism as a policy was denounced for many of the same reasons assimilationists have always raised against the maintenance of ethnicity. It would breed ‘double consciousness’—loyalty to more than one country; it would contribute to turning immigrant quarters into permanent ethnic ghettos; it would slow the process of overcoming an ignorance of English and French that made the immigrants exploitable in the past (Wilson 656).

Arguments in this vein work on the assumption that immigrants who are very different from the average Canadian would have significant resistance to integrating into Canadian society, despite have the desire to live, work, and *be* Canadian.

While there may be some merit to the concerns by critics of multiculturalism, there are two ways of addressing the critics’ concerns. The first way is to understand the integrative purpose of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism does not call for ethnic minorities to isolate themselves from the rest of Canadian society, focused only on their ancestral, ethnic culture, but encourages them to integrate into mainstream Canadian society. As Howard-Hassmann argues, Canadian multiculturalism is a form of “liberal multiculturalism [that] makes racial and ethnic identity a choice; [unlike] illiberal multiculturalism [which] categorizes people and obliges them to live within those categories” (526). Multiculturalism encourages ethnic participation in Canadian society by encouraging a “sense of shared citizenship, an emotional attachment of Canadians to the country and to each other” (527). It does so by making immigrants and ethnic minorities feel comfortable and welcome in Canada; “Members of minorities and new Canadians feel more valued than previously; as such, they find it easier, and more to their liking, to become Canadians” (534). While immigrants and ethnic minorities come to Canada with different customs, and from different backgrounds, what multiculturalism aims to achieve is to integrate

their distinctiveness into Canadian society, allowing them to contribute as efficiently and effectively as they can for the benefit of Canada. To relate this to the significance of the nation and national identity, for immigrants and ethnic minorities to have a sense of belonging to the Canadian nation, they must feel that their contribution is a mutually beneficial one; they must identify with the Canadian national identity, experiencing the virtues of tolerance, acceptance, equality and compassion.

The second way to address the concerns over multiculturalism is to explore Canada's history of race and ethnic relations to discover the source of critics' concerns. Perhaps this is more instructive as it encourages the realization of the blatantly discriminatory, prejudiced and exclusionary motives and policies that existed in Canada prior to the 1960s, and the dramatic changes that have occurred since then. For a country that called itself a 'peaceable kingdom' that was gentle, tolerant, caring and aimable, its treatment of minorities was incredibly discriminatory;

Jews and blacks were deemed to be unassimilable in Canadian society... 'Aryan' assumptions of most English-Canadian social and political elites openly manifested [its] will into the 1940s and 1950s... the Supreme Court of Canada concluded in December 1939 that racial discrimination was legally enforceable throughout Canada (Wilson 664).

Only until the end of the Second World War and the unearthing of the rampant genocide of Hitler did people begin to realize the inhuman dangers of ethnocentrism (Wilson 666). Arguably, it is because of the relatively recent history of Canadian discrimination and outright racist policies that some critics harbour doubts, suspicions and distrust of immigrants of ethnic minorities. A historical understanding of Canadian identity remains, in the face of a dramatically different, and diverse, Canadian reality.

As unfortunate as it may be for Canada to have such a negative history towards ethnic minorities, it is incredibly instructive since it also indicates the dramatic shift in both government policy and social perception. With policies such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Multiculturalism Act, in less than 20 years, the basic interpretation of Canadian identity has been transformed. A society and government that harboured racial and ethnic discrimination has essentially reformed itself by attempting "to devise a democratic vision by employing policy instruments of the nation state in the re-construction of the symbolic order and the redistribution of social status among racial and ethnocultural groups in Canadian society" (Wilson 653). An exclusionary society has been transformed into an inclusionary one, "and it is in this aspect of multiculturalism which has caught the imagination of onlookers throughout the world" (654). And while there were discriminatory policies in the past, one can say that "incidents of racism are not sufficient in and of themselves to convince citizens of non-European descent that they are not Canadians" (Howard-Hassmann 531). Discrimination may result in a person feeling excluded, but it doesn't negate the fact that the person sees themselves as a Canadian.

Arguably, these various political policies instituted in law, under the framework of citizenship, provide a means from which to create a strong, coherent, and open understanding of Canadian identity. By imbedding within Canadian citizenship a variety of rights, freedoms, and responsibilities, one is able to develop a 'new nationality' as proclaimed by the Canadian Fathers of Confederation, truly implementing "what George-Etienne Cartier called a 'deep-racial diversity'—a composite, heterogeneous plural society transcending differences of ethnic origins and religion among its citizens" (Wilson 651). Canada is a nation with strong values that forge a morally strong identity. This does not mean that each Canadian has the same values, cultural

heritage, racial features, or religious affiliation, all “display[ed] in equal measure” (Miller 26). Rather that “his personal life will have taken place in Canada, not abroad. Though he may eat foods different from other Canadians and worship at a mosque or a temple rather than a church, he will have attended the same schools, learned the same Canadian history and geography, and been present at the same lessons in family studies and sex education” (Howard-Hassmann 531). Thus, referring back to Miller’s definition of a nation, if Canadians have a sense of community of shared beliefs, with a common history, active character, connected to a particular territory with a distinct public culture, then Canada can be perceived as a nation, with an identifiable citizenry. The issue thus becomes whether that national identity is invoked enough to give Canadians the opportunity to express themselves against the backdrop of globalization and internal dissent from Quebec sovereigntists.

With reference to Quebec nationalism, it is not contradictory to consider the Quebecois as part of the Canadian nation. While Quebeckers have had a longer history than English-Canadians, the fact remains that they have played an instrumental part in the forging of the Canadian nation, and are integral part of the Canadian identity. In fact, the term ‘Canadian’ comes from the French-Canadians, who wanted to distinguish themselves from French living in New France. The key to this understanding of a Canadian nation, however, is the acceptance of this ‘imagined community’ by Quebeckers and English-Canadians alike. Of course, with sovereigntists having developed a strong Quebecois interpretation of history, the task of creating a sense of national unity between English and French Canadians becomes more difficult, but not impossible with a properly motivated national leadership. Nevertheless, if Canada is to survive as a nation, it must continue to promote itself as an inclusive community not limited by language or culture.

Suffice it to say, the Canadian identity must continue to be strengthened through public discourse and interaction. Canadians must further their understanding of their history, thus further developing national myths to encourage greater participation in the political community of Canada, incorporating both the bright and dark aspects of Canadian history. By realizing the pervasive influence of the United States, and Britain on Canada since Confederation, one can gain a strong sense of appreciation in the patriation of the constitution and the entrenchment of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. By realizing the discrimination and prejudice that existed in Canada from as recent as the 1960s, one can appreciate multiculturalism as a means of promoting greater equality, tolerance, acceptance and understanding within Canadian society. By understanding the historical, social, and political contexts of such policies as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the Multiculturalism Act, Canadians can begin to understand the noble moral values they promote within the framework of Canadian citizenship. In a sense, this may mean that Canadians need to re-evaluate what it means to be Canadian, but in a positive way, emphasizing the virtues of equality, tolerance, compassion and understanding that mark any great society.

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