

SUBMISSION

to the

**Consultation Commission on
Accommodation Practices
Related to Cultural Differences**

(Bouchard-Taylor Commission)

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by

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The contribution of immigration and diversity to Canada and Quebec¹

Immigration has contributed to the development of Canada and Quebec in a number of ways. One of the most important of these has been the enrichment of our society through the creation of an increasingly diverse population in recent decades.

Such diversity was not always welcome. Just a few decades ago, newcomers whose ancestors were not of Western European origin were looked down upon and often discriminated against by members of mainstream society. In contrast, most of us now welcome many of the changes that have taken place and consider our society to be richer and more interesting because of the contributions of newcomers.

These changes have not, however, taken place without problems and it is now clear that a better understanding must be reached as to the extent to which Canadians and Quebecers are prepared and should be expected to adapt to traditions and beliefs that newcomers bring with them.

There is no question that we have become one of the most inclusive and tolerant societies in the world and, hopefully, will continue to be so. My own family reflects this reality; my parents were immigrants from England and my wife is from Asia. Our two sons consider themselves to be entirely Canadian but, at the same time, very much appreciate their mother's heritage and can converse in her native language, Vietnamese.

¹ In the following commentary and recommendations I refer to both Canadian society in general and Quebec society in particular. I do this because I consider that the challenge of determining what is reasonable accommodation to the demands and expectations of newcomers is of major importance to both. While many of the issues are similar, I recognize that they are not altogether identical as, for example, in the case of the status of the French language in Quebec.

Official multiculturalism policy

One of the principal contributing factors that has caused confusion and misunderstanding has been the introduction of multiculturalism policy by the federal government in the 1970s. This has created the expectation among many members of immigrant communities that Canada is committed to accepting and adapting to whatever traditions, beliefs and practices they bring with them.

That multiculturalism policy had contributed to this confusion was reflected in comments made by former prime minister Pierre Trudeau in 1995. When asked what he thought of how multicultural policy had evolved since he launched it more than two decades earlier, he responded to the effect that it had been twisted to celebrate a newcomer's country of origin rather than a celebration of the newcomer becoming part of the Canadian fabric (Cobb, 2005). A similar assessment was made by former senior public servant Bernard Ostry, who played a major role in designing and launching multiculturalism policy. According to Ostry, while the policy was intended to assure new citizens full participation in the nation's life, some now consider it to have had the opposite effect—that it has encouraged minorities to retreat to their own corners (Ostry, 2005).

Along with the expectation that, as newcomers, they could preserve an identity based on their countries of origin and become components of a Canadian “mosaic,” came the assumption that, in many respects, it was the responsibility of Canadian and Quebec society to adapt to their requirements rather than vice versa. An example of the latter occurred recently in Vancouver when a Muslim taxi driver refused to transport a blind passenger's guide dog on religious grounds. While a human rights tribunal ruled that the taxi driver had discriminated against the blind person, the driver argued in response that that he had also suffered discrimination because a citizenship judge told him 15 years ago that he would be free to practice his religion and culture in Canada.

Different kinds of issues are involved in questions of accommodation

Different principles may apply in the various areas where clarification is needed. In the case of guide dogs being allowed in taxis, the issue relates to the rights of handicapped persons. In some cases security may be the principal concern – as for instance the requirement that photo-identification documents show the full face of the individual without any blockage from head coverings. In other instances it may be a question of safety, such as the need for motorcyclists to wear helmets. Further considerations may be involved in the demands of religious groups that they be provided with their own prayer rooms at educational institutions. While few Canadians would have a problem with such groups renting or purchasing their own facilities near the school or college in question, many would probably have reservations about the use space in the institution that had been designed for other purposes as well as going to the expense of converting it for the use of religious groups.

The need to define more clearly what newcomers can expect prior to their arrival here

What we need are better definitions of what newcomers can reasonably expect in terms of accommodation by Canadian and Quebec society to their requirements. We should remain as open and inclusive as possible but at the same time not be reticent about stating clearly how we do things here. If a prospective immigrant is going to encounter major difficulties in adapting to Canadian society, it is in their interests as well as ours that they choose a different country as their destination.

The foregoing describes what should be done to clarify the situation for people before they come to Canada and Quebec. We also, however, have to deal with those who are already here and who have developed expectations that our society will or should change in order to accommodate their requirements. They may, in the circumstances, argue—as did the taxi driver in Vancouver—that they had been led to expect that they should be able to run their affairs however they saw fit and even if it required others to make changes to accommodate them as long as they did not break the law.

Finding acceptable compromises in such instances could pose greater challenges than in the case of those who have not yet arrived here and have been duly advised as to what they had a right to expect and not expect. Were we to establish guidelines for prospective immigrants, however, this would also have the merit of outlining to newcomers already here of what we consider to be reasonable accommodation on the part Canadian and Quebec society and would establish terms of reference for the resolution of conflicting expectations that may have already developed.

It would send a clear signal that, while we welcome the diversity that many newcomers bring with them and while they are free to practice most of their traditions in their adopted country if they wish, it is up to them to adapt to the society that already exists here and that they should not expect us to make major changes to accommodate them.

Reasonable accommodation and its relationship to immigration

In making the above proposals, it is also necessary to say something about immigration policy since the issues that have arisen have done so almost entirely in the wake of the recent influx of large numbers of people from other countries. Supporters of large-scale immigration have to some extent justified the demands made by members of immigrant groups for changes in the way our society works because, as problematic as these demands may be, it is argued that it is essential that we continue to bring in large numbers of newcomers for economic or demographic reasons. A careful examination of such arguments, however, indicates that such rationales are of dubious validity to say the least.

While there were periods in Canadian history when large-scale immigration played an important role in the development of the country, there is little evidence that this is still

the case. A century ago it was necessary to bring in large numbers of people from abroad to populate the West in order to consolidate our claims to the region in the face of the rapid expansion of the American population in that direction. At that time there was also a case for a larger population to support economies of scale—which is no longer relevant since the Canadian economy is now heavily involved in foreign trade.

While it is often claimed that we are a land of vast open spaces that need to be populated, closer examination of this argument reveals that, unless there are economic opportunities in such areas, few Canadians are able to live and work there, let alone newcomers. The vast majority of newcomers now settle in our largest cities and become a major contributing factor to pressures on the health and educational systems as well as to increased levels of congestion and pollution.

Another argument used to justify high immigration levels is the claim that they can offset the effects of an aging population in which we will have a smaller proportion of working age people to support the costs of increasing numbers of retired persons. While there is no question that the average age of Canadians and Quebeckers is rising and that this will present a number of challenges, research has shown beyond doubt that immigration intake would have to increase to astronomical levels to have a meaningful impact on the situation. I discuss this and the other point mentioned above in a paper published by the Fraser Institute (Collacott, 2002).

There has in fact been extensive documentation available for almost two decades showing that there are neither significant economic or demographic benefits to Canadians from immigration. This was spelled out in the early 1990s in the comprehensive study undertaken by the Economic Council of Canada (Economic Council of Canada, 1991) and has been reiterated in more recent years by such eminent experts on immigration as Alan A. Green, Professor Emeritus at Queen's University (Green, 2003).

As for the purported economic benefits to Canadians of recent immigration, some research suggests that there has been the costs have been much higher than most of us realize. Professor emeritus Herbert Grubel, who is making a separate submission to the Commission, has estimated, for example, that the benefits received by newcomers who have come here in the last two decades are in the order of tens of billions of dollars per year in excess of what they pay in taxes (Grubel, 2005).

There has been considerable reluctance to discuss such issues in Canada because of pressure from various groups that benefit in one way or another from continued high immigration levels. These include political parties hoping that newcomers will vote for them if they support policies that make it easier for them and their relatives to come to Canada as well as immigrant service organizations that work hard at helping newcomers to settle here but also have a vested interest in maintaining high immigration levels in order to be assured of continued government funding.

This is not to suggest that Canada does not need any immigration. Much has been said recently about the current shortage of skilled labour—particularly in Alberta and British Columbia—and the extent to which foreign workers could be used to fill the gaps either on a temporary or permanent basis. Even this area must be approached with care, however. In contrast with the 1960s, when we launched programs to bring in skilled immigrants

because we were not in a position to meet all our needs from our own resources, as Alan Green points out, we now have the educational facilities to meet our domestic needs for skilled workers in all but exceptional cases (Green, 2003).

We will continue to have shortages in specific areas from time to time especially in sectors of the economy such as construction, which tend to be cyclical. As the Economic Council of Canada has noted however, over time the domestic labour market is able to meet most such shortages and immigration has rarely proved to be an effective means of dealing with them. Bringing in large numbers of foreign workers and creating a larger labour pool may be attractive for some employers but can deter Canadians from obtaining the necessary training to enter the labour market as wages become depressed.

The pros and cons of greater diversity

In addition to possible economic and demographic benefits from immigration, the third major rationale for having a major program is the contribution it can make to our social fabric. As noted above, the diversity that immigration has brought with it to Canada and Quebec in recent decades has enriched our society in various respects. The assumption in some quarters that a continuing increase in diversity is a valid objective in its own right, however, needs careful examination. The fact is that we have already arrived at a very high level of diversity in a relatively short time, especially in our larger cities.

One of the arguments that has been advanced in support of diversity is that it leads to greater creativity within society, particularly in large cities where major populations of immigrants are concentrated. Richard Florida, who currently teaches at the University of Toronto, is one of the best known advocates of this thesis. In Florida's estimation, "The ability to attract creative people in arts and cultural fields and to be open to diverse groups of people of different ethnic, racial and lifestyle groups provides distinct advantages to regions in generating innovation, growing and attracting high-technology industries, and spurring economic growth" (Florida, 2002).

Against such possible benefits from diversity must be measured disadvantages to the host population. According to Robert Putnam of Harvard University, "immigration and ethnic diversity tend to reduce social solidarity and social capital. New evidence from the US suggests that in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods residents of all races tend to 'hunker down'. Trust (even of one's own race) is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, friends fewer" (Putnam, 2007).

Putnam, interestingly, is regarded as a liberal academic whose own values put him squarely in the pro-diversity camp. After carrying out his initial research and finding himself the bearer of bad news, he struggled with how to present his work. and spent several years testing other possible explanations. What, nevertheless, emerged in more diverse communities was a bleak picture of civic desolation, affecting everything from political engagement to the state of social ties (Page, 2007).

Despite such depressing findings, Putnam expresses the hope that, in the longer term, American society will overcome the fragmentation resulting from the current high

levels of diversity and that greater social solidarity and more encompassing identities will emerge. He is encouraged in this regard by the fact that US society had become very diverse because of high immigration intake at earlier times in its history and had eventually succeeded in reasserting a strong sense of national identity and cohesion (Putnam, 2007).

Putnam is by no means alone in finding encouragement in the fact that, earlier in our history, large numbers of immigrants from diverse backgrounds were eventually integrated successfully into American and Canadian society. Advocates of high immigration intake often make this point in defense of the policies they promote.

There are, however, some important differences between how immigration was conducted a hundred years ago and what is happening today. In the past, we went through periods of high intake (as, for example, when we were populating the Prairies in the early 20th Century). These, however, were followed by periods of low immigration, as in the 1930s because of the Depression and during World War II. The periods of low intake provided a breathing spell during which newcomers, or at least their children, were integrated into the host society.

Pressures against integration of newcomers

In contrast, in recent decades, immigration has been driven increasingly by factors other than our economic needs or absorptive capacity, and there is no indication of any interest on the part of governments to ease off on immigration levels and provide the sort of breathing spell that allowed us to catch up on the process of integration as in earlier times.²

The second factor that was not present in earlier times is official multiculturalism policy. While many newcomers are quite happy to integrate into Canadian and Quebec society, a good many others are attracted to the possibility of enjoying the various benefits of living in this country and province while maintaining the fiction that they can do so without having to make any major compromises between following the traditions of their land of origin and adapting to those of their new country. Multiculturalism and the concept of the “mosaic” provide them with a philosophical basis for believing this is both feasible and acceptable.

In the circumstances, it would be highly unwise of us to assume that our currently very diverse immigrant population will, in time, automatically blend into the mainstreams of Canadian and Quebec society. The problems some European countries are experiencing make it clear that we should take nothing for granted in this regard.

While we have put a greater effort into integrating newcomers than most other countries, there are indications that the process is slowing down—particularly as some of

² Pierre Trudeau was the last Canadian leader to adjust immigration intake in accordance with our needs and absorptive capacity. In 1983 he lowered intake to less than 100,000 per year because of adverse economic conditions. After taking office, the Progressive Conservative began raising the levels and by 1990 had pushed them to over 200,000, where they have remained almost every year despite the state of the economy.

the immigrant communities are becoming sufficiently large that there is less incentive and indeed less opportunity for newcomers to become involved in mainstream society.

In addition to indications of serious and widespread poverty in some immigrant communities, it was noted as early as 1972 that the sponsorship of relatives in particular had led to the growth of large and, to a considerable extent, self-contained ethnic communities in the larger cities (Hawkins, 1972). A dramatic increase in visible minority neighbourhoods³ was subsequently documented by Statistics Canada when it reported that in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal they had increased from six in 1981 to 254 in 2001 (Hou and Picot, 2004).

We should be concentrating on the integration of newcomers already here

What we should be concentrating on now is the successful integration into the economy and society in general in Canada and Quebec of those newcomers already in the country. To simply add to the challenges confronting us by continuing to bring in large numbers—most of whom are not needed on either economic or demographic grounds—is not in the interests of the newcomers who have already arrived nor that of Canadians and Quebecers, who will feel increasingly challenged and almost certainly less welcoming.

Given the expectation of many newcomers that Canadian society should change in order to adapt to their traditions and preferences, we can only expect that the pressure to do so will increase with the continued large-scale inflow of new arrivals. These are, therefore, issues that need to be examined now rather than waiting until some of the problems become as acute as they have in a number of European countries.

In the case of the latter, it was assumed for many years that their liberal and tolerant host societies would automatically bring about the successful integration of large numbers of newcomers coming from very different backgrounds. These countries have finally had to acknowledge that such an outcome has frequently not been the case and that they are now faced with serious problems that will be very difficult to resolve. We must not wait for such a situation to develop here.

In conjunction with efforts to establish what constitutes reasonable accommodation of the traditions and demands of newcomers, a review of immigration policy is urgently required both in Quebec and in Canada in general. We can, however, expect strong opposition from those who for one reason or another benefit from our maintaining high levels of intake. Frequently accompanying opposition to such reforms are allegations that arguments supporting the reduction of immigration levels are essentially racist in nature.

Such charges are based on the fact that, since three quarters of newcomers are now visible minorities, a decrease in immigration levels will affect non-whites more than

3 A “visible minority neighbourhood” is defined in the paper as having 30% of its population from a particular visible minority group. The authors also note that most of the visible minorities are immigrants.

whites. The fact is, however, that we have nothing to apologize for in this respect. While only 13% of Canada's population are visible minorities, 75% of newcomers to Canada are visible minorities, demonstrating unquestionably that we are not discriminating against the selection of immigrants who are none-white.

While we should be looking at both the number of people we are taking in as well as how we select them, there is no reason why we need to depart significantly from the current mix of whom we bring in. I don't believe that most Canadians and Quebecers have a problem with the colour of a newcomer's skin. The problems lie more in clarifying what are reasonable expectations, in ensuring that the numbers are commensurate with our real needs, and in putting in place selection standards that provide for better outcomes for newcomers in terms of integrating into the economy and society in general.

Summary and conclusions

In summary, what Quebec needs is to establish guidelines on what constitutes reasonable accommodation on the part of the host society with regard to the expectations and entitlement of immigrants in connection with the practice of their traditions and expression of their values in their adopted homeland. This cannot be done overnight and will require a good deal of consultation and reflection in order to ensure we arrive at guidelines that protect what we consider to be essential to the preservation of our national identity and the character of our basic institutions while at the same time retaining as much flexibility as possible for the practice of their traditions and religions on the part of newcomers. Secondly, we must undertake a thorough review of the goals of immigration in relation to how many immigrants we need and can effectively absorb. This will have to be carried out in cooperation with the federal government since the latter has primary responsibility for immigration policy.

There has been far too much doubt expressed some quarters about whether we really have a culture and traditions in this country - probably more so in English-speaking Canada than in Quebec. This has led some newcomers to believe that a cultural vacuum exists here and, encouraged by official multiculturalism policy, that they are invited to fill it. This is not the case with the populations of most other countries in the world. They are aware of who they are and, while for the most part friendly to people from elsewhere, do not see the need to make major changes to their traditions and institutions in order to accommodate the expectations of those who come from abroad.

Quebeckers and Canadians in general are among the most generous and inclusive in the world when it comes to welcoming people from other countries and not merely accepting but joining in the celebration of the many of the traditions they bring with them. Our societies, moreover, continue to evolve and to absorb some of these influences. Newcomers, therefore, can be reassured that they are fully valued as members of Canadian and Quebec society. By the same token, we should not be reluctant about making clear that we as Quebeckers and Canadians also have our traditions and ways of doing things and that, if newcomers wish to settle here, they must be prepared to adapt to these ways.

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Martin Collacott is a senior fellow at the Fraser Institute specializing in immigration and refugee policy as well as issues related to multiculturalism, diversity and terrorism. After obtaining degrees in philosophy from the University of Toronto, he worked at the Toronto YMCA and subsequently for the Ontario Ministry of Education, where he was responsible for the teaching of English and citizenship to immigrants throughout the province. He later spent five years in Malaysian Borneo training teachers in the Chinese schools in the teaching of English as a second language. He joined the foreign service in 1966 and was assigned to Indochina, Hong Kong, Beijing, Lagos and Tokyo. During this period he also served as the Chinese-speaking member of the Canadian team that negotiated the establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Later in his diplomatic career he was appointed as high commissioner to Sri Lanka and Maldives, and ambassador to Syria, Lebanon, and Cambodia. Following his retirement from the foreign service he was involved in projects in East and Southeast Asia related to conflict resolution, human rights and governance. More recently he has concentrated on the reform of immigration and refugee policy and spoken extensively on these topics in addition to publishing numerous articles in the *National Post*, *Globe & Mail*, *Ottawa Citizen* and *Vancouver Sun* and appearing before parliamentary and congressional committees in Ottawa and Washington.