Canada: A Mosaic, Not a Melting Pot; Fast-Growing, Multihued Immigrant Population Raises Question of What Being 'Canadian' Means Now

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Body

In contrast to the nation states of Europe, or the United States, ***Canada***'s metaphor for how to incorporate ***immigrants*** is ***not*** the ***melting pot*** but the ***mosaic*** -- brightly colored bits of ethnicity, culture, racial identity and language embedded side by side. They may contrast with one another, but together they form a portrait of the nation in the same way the dots on a pointillist painting convey a coherent image.

Increasingly, though, this nation of ***immigrants*** -- once overwhelmingly white, ***now*** ***multihued*** -- has begun to confront a troubling ***question***: With all these differences, does being ***Canadian*** still ***mean*** anything more than sharing a vast, cold expanse of land? The ***mosaic*** approach is in evidence at the Dundas Public School, in this city's working-class west end, where 550 students from kindergarten through fifth grade are immersed daily in Asian songs, Caribbean food and folk studies ***meant*** to sustain the languages and cultures of a student body whose families came here from Vietnam, China, the West Indies and elsewhere.

"Diversity," principal Kent Rickett said, "maintains a strength that can't be maintained if everything is ***melted*** down."

But 30 miles west of Toronto, in brick tract houses rising by the hundreds in suburban towns like Whitby, the attitude toward ***Canada***'s emerging multicultural quilt is more ambivalent. Whitby resident Anne Eade, the daughter of a Hungarian ***immigrant***, said she worries that immigration may be overwhelming other notions of what it ***means*** to be ***Canadian***.

She said she was disturbed when, working as a manager in a Toronto area restaurant, she could ***not*** understand the broken English of the Cantonese, Sri Lankans and others who formed an increasing percentage of her staff and clientele.

"If you look at the U.S., everybody there . . . they are Americans first. Here, it seems like you are a ***Canadian*** second," Eade said as she played with her two young children in a Whitby park. "In Toronto, people put their cultural background first. . . . I found it very hard to communicate. I have no qualms with them coming. I am ***not*** asking them to change their life, just communicate."

Between the concerns expressed by Eade, and the goals expressed by Dundas principal Rickett, lies a continuum upon which ***Canada*** struggles to resolve the ideals of the ***mosaic***.

Immigrants and non-English or non-French speakers are the ***fastest-growing*** portion of the ***Canadian*** ***population*** and they dominate some urban areas where they concentrate. Currently, more than 17 percent of ***Canadian*** citizens were born somewhere else -- nearly double the percentage of U.S. citizens born elsewhere -- and a similar fraction speak a mother tongue other than English or French, ***Canada***'s two official languages. A majority of

children in Vancouver's central school district has a mother tongue other than English. But although they are officially welcomed, supported with a plethora of services from welfare to language training, the newest pieces of the ***mosaic*** have ***not*** always rubbed easily with the older ones.

It is rare, for example, to spot the ***mosaic*** in uniform: Only 2 percent of ***Canada***'s military is nonwhite, compared with more than 10 percent of the nation's ***population***. And in the hockey rinks around Toronto, a city estimated to be 40 percent nonwhite, "you don't see a lot of kids of those [***immigrant***] ancestral backgrounds participating," said John Gardner, president of the Greater Toronto Hockey League. "Look at Chinatown. . . . They still live in the same cultural environment that their parents or grandparents did."

Immigration has added flavor to dynamic, diverse cities like Toronto and Vancouver, where Asian characters glow in neon at suburban malls and a wealth of ethnic festivals enliven the summer. But there are cultural tensions as concrete as the anger felt when schools shift money from art and music to English language training, and as abstract as the sense that ***Canada*** is building a ***mosaic*** with no overarching design.

On talk radio shows, callers take broad swipes at specific communities, complaining in a gentle, ***Canadian*** way that, for example, East Indians in one Toronto neighborhood put the trash out on the wrong day and don't cut their grass. High-profile hockey broadcaster Don Cherry says ***Canada*** has become the "garbage can of the world" because of whom its immigration laws allow into the country. Feuds over Sikh turbans, Chinese signs and rising crime have all flared.

A recent blue-ribbon review of ***Canadian*** immigration policy shows how deep these concerns can run. The review concluded that ***Canada*** should be choosier about whom it accepts, refining its standards to identify those who will most quickly begin contributing money, taxes, jobs and energy to the economy. ***Immigrants*** should learn English or French before they are allowed to come, the review concluded, and they should show, through volunteer work or other ***means***, that they are blending in.

"In Quebec and all over ***Canada***, people say that to have a ***Canadian*** passport is a joke," said Robert Trempe, a former deputy minister of immigration in Quebec and chairman of the panel that reviewed immigration policy. "We have a lot of people holding ***Canadian*** passports who have never been in ***Canada***, or were in ***Canada*** just to get the passport, and then, goodbye."

Trempe added: "The answer we tried to bring was a difficult one when we tried to say: Examine the possibility of having people prove, show, that they are really starting to be a part of this society. That they can place a chair in the church basement for the choir, or keep [a neighbor's] children, that they can give to organizations."

The competing vision, given voice through a number of recent books and analyses, imagines ***Canada*** as a "postmodern" nation where openness to different cultures -- and its demands for little conformity in return -- are more suitable to a globalized world. Its supporters contend that economic and social data show multiculturalism is allowing people to retain what they want of their native culture, while also blending effectively with ***Canadian*** society.

Will Kymlicka, a philosophy professor at the University of Ottawa, analyzed patterns of political participation, the rates at which ***immigrants*** become naturalized citizens and nationwide polling data on such issues as interracial marriage. Far from becoming balkanized, he said, ***Canada***'s ***immigrants*** "quickly absorb and accept ***Canada***'s basic liberal-democratic values," become citizens at rates higher than ***immigrants*** to the United States, learn English or French almost without exception, and appear to have contributed to a general leavening of attitudes toward mixed marriages and other cultural issues.

Morton Beiser, head of a Toronto-based center for immigration research, went a step further. He said research shows it is rare for ***immigrant*** families to retain much of their native culture beyond the second generation. He said the extent of social integration becomes clear through health data: ***Immigrants*** usually arrive at a healthier weight, and with healthier eating and drinking habits, than the rest of North America, but quickly achieve the continental norms.

"The more they stay in the country, the more they tend to look like the average ***Canadian***," Beiser said.

To Noo Shafarir, it is precisely ***Canada***'s loosely defined culture that makes the country attractive to her. The 29-year-old immigrated from Iran last year mostly because she did ***not*** like the restrictions placed on women by the Islamic government.

Interviewed with other new ***immigrants*** at an adult English class, she said ***Canada*** is a country with "nice nature," but she did ***not*** yet know much about its history or what it is like outside Toronto. More significant to her, she said, is that she can pursue a career in computer programming, and that she and a new group of friends from around the world have had little trouble fitting in. She said most everyone she meets is from somewhere else.

"In Europe, you feel like you're a foreigner," she said. "Here, all the people are foreigners. I find friends from all societies."

In the classrooms of Dundas, teacher Thuy Nguyen said she has seen the value of the ***mosaic*** in the attitudes of her students. It wasn't too long ago, she said, that Vietnamese children felt the sting of ethnic taunts. Today, the kids rely on one another to learn the words and phrases of a mix of languages.

Rather than forcing ***Canada***'s ***immigrants*** to fit one design, the current approach "equalizes everyone, and they become friendly," said Nguyen. "They forget about where you come from, and they begin to learn."

The ***Canadian Mosaic***

Since the 1960s, the largest group of ***immigrants*** has come from Asia.

Distribution of origin of 1996 arrivals (Total 224,000)

Europe 17.1

Africa and Middle 16.1

East

South America, Central America, 8.3

Caribbean

United States 2.6

Asia and Pacific islands 55.2

SOURCE: 1991 Census of ***Canada***, custom tabulation by Toronto Metropolitan authorities

Graphic

Chart, The Washington Post; Photo, howard schneider, "I find friends from all societies," says Noo Shafarir of Iran, above left, sharing a table with Eunjung Ju of South Korea during an English language class at the Bickford Center, an adult education facility in Toronto. William Tian of China, at left, hopes for a position in the financial service industry.

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