



THE CRIC PAPERS

A Changing
People:
**Being Canadian
in a New Century**



Centre for Research and
Information on Canada

A P R I L 2 0 0 3

Table of Contents

1	Preface
2	Introduction: How Canada is Changing by Andrew Parkin
10	Demographic Change: A Prairie Perspective by John R. Allan
15	Canada's Francophone Communities Look to the Future (Roundtable discussion)
20	Bilingualism in Canada and the US: Are We Losing Our Comparative Advantage? by Jack Jedwab and Andrew Parkin
24	Being Canadian by David Baxter
27	A Decade Different From the Last: Canada at the Heels of Increased Immigration by The Honourable Lincoln M. Alexander
29	Appendix: Canada at Glance

Being Canadian

by David Baxter

Canada is proving an exception to Marshall McLuhan's dictum that people march backwards into the future. Partly as a result of policy, but largely the result of benign neglect, Canada is showing the world the possibility of a nation where people are defined by their humanity, not ancestry, nationality or appearance. Canada has not yet achieved this, and perhaps no nation can, but the vitality of Canada's communities shows the validity of the concept of a nation where, to paraphrase Nobelist Naguib Mahfouz's definition of paradise, every person can reasonably aspire to live in security and dignity.

Nowhere better is this shown than in Canada's schools, where the future of Canada – children from twenty, fifty, a hundred different ancestral and language backgrounds – are figuring out how to deal with a diversity of opinion, attitude, appearance and ability that most adults cannot even imagine. In doing so, these kids are building a new, living, tolerant culture that effectively defines Canada now and will do so in the future.

This is not to suggest that all is sweetness and light, either in schools or communities. There are problems and conflicts. But these are overwhelmingly the problems that always come with people, with all of their warts and bumps, living together. They are not problems created by diverse ancestries.

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BEING, NOT BECOMING, CANADIAN

The kids in our schools are not becoming Canadian; they are being Canadian. Two examples, one named after home canning products and the other after paper products, illustrate the vitality of the culture that flourishes in young Canada:

- Wide Mouth Mason, a great blues rock band from Saskatoon, is about as multicultural and multi-ancestral as you can get, and yet cranks out music that is light years away from "heritage days" at the local community centre.
- Rice Paper, the Asian arts Canadian culture magazine that robustly synthesizes ancestry and contemporary into Canadian culture, has regular contributors from Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, and Montreal. Its latest cover commentary notes that "Canadian artistic and cultural expression is innovative and dynamic, and in most cases, expressive of its communities", something the magazine emphatically demonstrates.

In this media vein, the current box office hit "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" is quintessentially a Canadian movie, not merely because it was made by and stars someone from Winnipeg but is set in Chicago, nor merely because it is a light-hearted romantic comedy, but because it captures the reality that individuation is a much more fundamental human process than acculturation. In one of the movie's "touching" scenes, the heroine (can one use any other description for the brave Tula?) is assured by her bother Nick that her ancestry does not define her, but rather that it is part of what she can carry forward as she defines herself.

THE GAP OF THE FUTURE

While Canada's synthesis of diversity is most obvious in the big metropolitan regions of Canada, communications and mobility mean that it is happening throughout the country – look at the roots and sources of Rice Paper and Wide Mouth Mason. The electronic global village of Much Music and the net, 'zines and boarding, fashion and politics have erased spatial divides. The gap of the future is not between urban and rural, or immigrant and non-immigrant, but, between those who embrace change and those who are repelled by it.

The reality of Canada's rich culture is indicated by the 2001 Census. Given McLuhan's dictum, as might be expected, much of the response to the 2001 Census release of ancestry data looked backwards, at people's place of birth, period of immigration, and officially defined minority status, rather than at how people viewed themselves and their country. This focus on the rear view mirror meant that some very significant indicators were given scant consideration.

DEFINING OURSELVES

For example, little was made about the fact that, given the chance, we increasingly define ourselves as Canadians. In 2001, 39% of Canadians listed Canada as an ethnic origin, up from 31% in 1996, and far and away the leading choice. This increase was matched by a decline in number (and hence share) of people who selected ethnic origins in the other top five options, English, French, Scottish, Irish, and German. This makes sense. As a country matures, migration from other countries many generations earlier loses contemporary relevance.

An interesting dimension of growing acknowledgment of Canada as defining our heritage is that the 33% increase in the number of people giving Canadian as their ethnic origin was the result of a 27% increase in Canadian as a single ethnic origin and a 42% increase in the number for whom Canadian was one among multiple origins. Being Canadian does not mean divorcing one's ancestry.

The propensity of Canadians to acknowledge that one of their origins is Canada will continue to grow – slowly – as the country matures. With 22% of the 2001 population 15 years of age and older born outside Canada, and a further 16% of this adult population being the Canadian born children of this 22%, it will take a few years for Canadian as an ethnic origin to reach the level at which no one will bother to ask the question. After all, it took Statistics Canada until 1996 to list Canada as an origin option on the Census (Newfoundland became an option as an ethnic origin in 2001). This temporal pattern is shown in the provincial reporting of ethnic origin, with the slowly growing provinces having the highest incidence of reporting Canadian ethnic origin and the rapidly growing ones having the lowest level.

IMMIGRANT OR FOREIGN-BORN?

The backward focus on origins is also found in Statistics Canada's definition of immigrants, which labels people born outside Canada, regardless of when they arrived here, as immigrants, rather than what they are, which is foreign born Canadians. While it is true that these people immigrated to Canada at some time in the past, immigration is a process that ends with citizenship. According to Statistics Canada's definition, the first Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John A. MacDonald, was an immigrant throughout his life in Canada; he probably thought he was a Canadian.

Words have not only definitions, but uses, and the term "immigrant" is too often used to establish an excluding distinction. For example, the Fraser Institute recently published a book which argues immigration increases health care costs because so many "immigrants" are old, drawing this conclusion from Statistics Canada's data on the foreign-born population. The fact, explicitly shown in the data, is that the overwhelming majority of the "old immigrants" came to Canada as young people, have been Canadian citizens for decades, and that the age profile of people who are current immigrants (Statistics Canada calls them recent immigrants) is significantly younger than the population of current citizens. The misrepresentation of the immigrant population is abetted by Statistics Canada use of the term immigrant to mean foreign-born.

VISIBLE MINORITIES AND MAJORITIES

A final example of looking away from both the present and the future is found in Statistics Canada's visible minority data. These data show that in some communities, the "minority" is the majority, and that in many others it is a minority that nears the majority in size. It must be understood that the "visible minority" is a derived variable: census respondents are not asked whether they consider themselves part of a visible minority. Statistics Canada defines you to be part of the visible minority if you are anything but "white" or "aboriginal". With the increase in the proportion of people with multiple ancestries, in the future a lot of respondents are going to have a hard time figuring out whether or not they are white.

A much different picture of Canadian diversity would emerge if people were asked if they felt they were part of visible minority. Some white folks would probably say yes, as would a lot of tattooed skateboarders and very tall people. Visible minority is a concept whose time, thankfully, is just about gone, soon to be replaced by the concept of a diverse humanity.

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POLICY

The role of policy in contributing to the vitality and diversity of Canadian communities is an oft debated topic. Canada has had an official policy of multiculturalism, which in its unfortunate moments equated ancestry with culture. This policy certainly was not hostile to the development of tolerant and diverse communities, but it did not, on its own, create them. For multiculturalism to work, it needed the larger ambiguity of bi-culturalism. Effectively, once two ancestries, two cultures, in one nation are officially okay, it is hard to say that three, four, five, aren’t. Without the mould of a single role model of a “Canadian”, people could not be compelled to become Canadian. Instead, they were free to be Canadian by participating in Canadian life.

Other countries have not been so fortunate. Born out of revolution and revolt, the United States of America had to create an “American” for people to become. The resulting tension between an external single definition of what it is to be an American and the complex reality of an individual continues to affect community life in the USA.

ANTIQUATED DEFINITIONS OF CITIZENSHIP

An even greater tension exists in Europe, where acknowledgement of single global community repeatedly conflicts with cultural definitions from a distant past. Until recently, the only way to become a German citizen was to have had parents who were. In France one had only to give up one’s ancestry and adopt all of the cultural mannerism of the French (well, Parisians actually) to be French; embrace Racine and give up vos racines.

The reality of many communities in these countries is that they are as diverse as those of Canada, but because of the antiquated national definition of A citizen and A culture, there is a level of stress and lack of recognition that is much, much greater than it is in Canada.

Canadians are not better, or more tolerant, people than those in the rest of the world. The absence of a state endorsed model of citizen and culture has simply meant that our culture could grow, diversify and embrace change with much less tension.

This is not to say that there is no tension in Canada between those who look longingly backwards to an ancestry-based culture that never really existed and the reality of a multi-cultural society, where culture is defined by values, interests and intelligence, not by ancestry, appearance or parentage. This is where we are going – this is the culture that is emerging from our schools and communities. This is our future, and with our children, the future is in good hands.

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