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Pundits, Pachyderms and Pluralism: The Never-ending Debate on Multiculturalism

Karim H. Karim

This is an edited version of the text of the UBC-Laurier Institution Multiculturalism Lecture delivered on June 20, 2007 at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver Canada. It was broadcast on the Ideas program of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Radio One on June 26, 2007. It was then published in the Canadian Journal of Communication Vol. 34 (4), pp. 701-710 in 2009.

Abstract

The word 'multiculturalism' was coined in the early 1970s, from which time various pundits worldwide have given it differing, often contradictory, interpretations; based on their own socio-cultural contexts. Similar to Rumi's elephant in the dark house, the pachyderm of the title was understood differently by those who could only touch certain parts of its body. Prof. Karim follows with a discussion on the history of cultural pluralism in Canada, the first country to enshrine multiculturalism into official policy. The policy has been linked to 'integration' as well as 'assimilation' and has both supporters and critics; with the latter believing that it threatens to destroy the nation's integrity. 'Public sphericules' of minority interests are seen as co-existing and intersecting with the dominant public sphere, conceptualising civic participation in pluralist societies. The article concludes with how multiculturalism should be reinterpreted in the 21st century where globalisation has challenged the traditional structure of nations. Today, immigrants are both comfortable with multiple identities and are often in greater contact with their diasporas than formerly. His Highness The Aga Khan has praised Canadian efforts to support pluralist values, which he sees as essential in the future of the world.

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The word ‘multiculturalism,’ appeared in the early 1970s. It has been suggested that it was coined in Switzerland, but Canada was the first to enshrine it into official policy. Now it has spread around the world. Many people favour it, many others don’t, but very few are indifferent. The term has acquired many meanings. As policy, it is variously thought of as designed to foster immigrant integration, improve race relations, reduce communal conflict, encourage good citizenship, support national cohesion, and enjoin cultural assimilation. And even though its emphasis and application differ between countries, there appears to be an incorrect impression that ‘multiculturalism,’ is the same around the world.

Even within Canada, when people discuss its value or lack thereof, they often do not refer to the same things. The manner in which some debates unfold appears to show that the discussants do not realise that their respective understandings of multiculturalism are different. This situation is akin to an ancient fable in which people argued about the descriptions of an elephant. There are several versions of this tale. One appears in the *Mathnawi* of the Sufi saint Jalaluddin Rumi, whose writings are undergoing a wave of popularity in Western countries even though he was born 800 years ago in what is now Afghanistan. I will relate part of a translation of the Persian original:

The elephant was in a dark house: some Hindus had brought it for exhibition. In order to see it, many people were going, every one, into that darkness. As seeing it

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with the eye was impossible, each one was feeling it in the dark with the palm of his hand.

The hand of one fell on its trunk: he said, "This creature is like a water-pipe." The hand of another touched its ear: to him it appeared to be like a fan. Since another handled its leg, he said, "I found the elephant's shape to be like a pillar." Another laid a hand on its back: he said, "Truly, this elephant was like a throne." Similarly, wherever any one heard a description of the elephant, he understood only in respect of the part that he had touched (Rumi, pp. 71-72).

The moral of the story is that individuals often argue about a subject because they are talking about specific parts of it, not the whole. Like the metaphorical pachyderm of the tale, multiculturalism has a large presence but it seems that people remain in the dark about its many interpretations. We refer to the same term, but frequently mean different things. There are varying understandings of its terminology, its purposes, and its expressions. Canadians have been discussing and debating the policy for three and a half decades, but we have often been talking past each other because of the varying interpretations that we have given to it. I do not purport to unveil today any notion of a 'real multiculturalism'; my intention is to bring to light the existence of the varying understandings about it. This is in the hope that when we recognise the diversity of our perspectives, we shall move a step closer to a more productive discussion. Diversity, after all, is key to the subject at hand.

Before we examine this confused situation, it would be worth our while to trace the sources of cultural pluralism in this country. In the 1840s, Governor General Lord Durham, recently arrived from London, wrote in the following manner about the political tensions between the British and French in Canada:

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I expected to find a contest between a government and a people; I found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state: I found a struggle not of principles but of races. (McNaught, 1976, p. 94)

However, his proposal that the French residents of British North America be assimilated through a policy of Anglo-conformity was rejected by the local residents. At Confederation in 1867, English as well as French could be officially used in the federal parliament and courts. With the steady growth of this policy over the next century, the country came to be characterised as 'bilingual and bicultural'.

However, this arrangement was unsatisfactory for a number of francophones in Québec and the province's independence movement began to grow. The Pearson government established the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1963 to study how the political partnership between the two groups could be developed further. As the commissioners travelled from Atlantic Canada through Québec and Ontario, they generally found a welcome reception. But they ran into an unexpected mountain of opposition on the Prairie flatlands. The notion that the character of the country was only British and French met strong disagreement from other European groups, such as those of Ukrainian and Polish origins. Their submissions appear to have had a significant impact on the commission. Volume 4 of its report, which was published in 1969, was titled *The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups* (Canada, Royal Commission, 1967-70).

It was in October 1971 that the new Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, announced the policy of "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework." He said in the House of Commons:

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We believe that cultural pluralism is the very essence of Canadian identity. Every ethnic group has the right to preserve and develop its own culture and values within the Canadian context. To say we have two official languages is not to say we have two official cultures, and no particular culture is more ‘official’ than another. A policy of multiculturalism must be a policy for all Canadians (Quoted in Harney, 1988, p. 69).

The cultural presence in Canada of non-British and non-French communities was formally recognised with these words. At the same time, the historically dominant status of Canadians of English and French origins—whose respective languages maintained official status—was re-affirmed. The separation of language and culture does not make anthropological sense, but this was the kind of compromise that has often characterised Canadian politics. It suggested that individuals of all ethnocultural backgrounds could belong either to the English-speaking or French-speaking group, depending on their first official language. With no particular culture being more official than another, even the smallest and the most recently established community would in theory be considered to be as Canadian, as the largest and the oldest.

The Australian immigration minister happened to be in the visitors’ gallery on the day of Trudeau’s announcement, and a few years later Canberra also adopted multiculturalism. The first decade of the policy saw an emphasis on cultural retention, mostly with respect to European-origin minorities. As immigration was opened to non-Europeans, the federal multiculturalism establishment found itself having to deal more directly with issues of racial discrimination. The bureaucratic structures devoted to the implementation of the policy grew steadily along with their budgetary allocations in the 1980s. As a result of lobbying by ethnocultural associations and the politics of the day, the national parties adopted a strong

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multicultural agenda that included proposals for the establishment of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act and a Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship.

However, despite demands by ethnocultural associations for parity with the bilingualism policy, multiculturalism legislation did not provide for enforcement mechanisms, such as oversight by an official commissioner. Fiscal allocations were also to be considerably smaller than those for bilingualism programs. The multiculturalism bill was tabled in Parliament by the government of Brian Mulroney and became law in July 1988. It identified a policy, an implementation framework, and a parliamentary monitoring system. Its preamble states that ‘The Act commits the Government of Canada to assist communities and institutions in bringing about equal access and participation for all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural, and political life of the nation’ (Canada, Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, 1990, p. 1).

Federal institutions have to implement the policy by establishing programs that respond to the cultural diversity of the country’s population. In the years since the establishment of multiculturalism, its bureaucratic structure had grown from a unit within the former Department of the Secretary of State to a sector in the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship. But the latter ministry was short-lived. In one of few legacies of Kim Campbell’s brief prime ministership, several federal departments were combined to form super-ministries. Canadian Heritage absorbed Multiculturalism, which was dramatically reduced in magnitude and prominence within the federal structure. One of the reasons for the downsizing of multiculturalism was the growing opposition from certain sections of the Canadian public. Québec nationalists had long feared that multiculturalism had been concocted by Trudeau to thwart the status of francophones. Although Aboriginal

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groups did not necessarily oppose this policy, they felt that it could not address their key issue of land claims.

The controversy over allowing Sikh RCMP officers to wear turbans instead of Stetsons was extremely contentious, especially in Western Canada. Political opposition to multiculturalism was galvanized by the Reform Party. Public opinion at large, while favourable to the broad concept of cultural pluralism, was less enthusiastic about providing government grants to support minority cultures. Press criticism of the policy seemed to intensify in direct proportion to the growth of multiculturalism, particularly in the lead-up to the passage of the Act. A number of provincial governments shut down their programs, but the federal apparatus has survived to this day—albeit in a much diminished form.

Among the major criticisms of the policy was that too much of taxpayers' money was spent on programs for minority groups, even though the actual amounts were minuscule compared to overall government spending on culture. Another complaint was that politicians were using multiculturalism for their own advantage. While there was considerable truth to this, critics seemed to be under the impression that voters of minority backgrounds invariably operated under herd mentality. And certainly this is not the only policy that leaves itself open to political exploitation. Much more fundamental criticism of multiculturalism has been that it compromises national social cohesion by ghettoising minorities and freezing their identities into a permanent hyphenated status. This is the issue that I will address at some length.

In examining media coverage of multiculturalism in the last 25 years the one most consistent thread of criticism that emerges is that the policy will destroy the nation's integrity. This argument appears in many versions that draw from the issues of the day. Multiculturalism has been blamed for the allegedly widespread support of

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terrorism among Sikhs in the 1980s, among Tamils in the 1990s, and among Muslims currently. There are some stories that pop up with cyclic regularity: for example, those about ethnic gangs and how the practices of particular cultures disrupt life in neighbourhoods. This is not to say that the op-ed pages of our newspapers do not provide a lively forum for a debate on various sides of these issues. Unfortunately, as in most cases, it is the articles that paint the most fearful scenarios that tend to get the most attention. The general impression that emerges is that society is under siege from foreign elements and that multiculturalism is acting as a fifth column abetting the destruction of the nation's social and cultural structures.

Perhaps the best way to describe this discourse is as a moral panic. Stanley Cohen (1972) defines it as a societal reaction to a group based on the false or exaggerated perception that its cultural behaviour is dangerously deviant and poses a menace to societal values and interests. The general tone of hundreds of articles on multiculturalism written over several decades is alarmist. Canadian society is imperilled by alien cultures, the centre is not holding, we are in danger of imminent collapse. The sky should have fallen by now, but it hasn't.

A key issue in the multiculturalism discourse of many pundits is confusion about the words used to describe the policy. There is a certain lexicon that is part of the discussions on multiculturalism. It includes words like pluralism, diversity, mosaic, melting pot, assimilation, integration, citizenship, national identity, core Canadian values, community, mainstream, majority, minority, ethnic, ethnocultural, race, visible minority, immigrant, and diaspora. But the meanings that individual commentators attach to these words often vary. Therefore, the very terms of the debate remain ambiguous. Like the individuals in Rumi's story, writers are

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constantly talking past rather than to each other because they are actually referring to different things.

One of the problems is over the uses of the words ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’. Whereas government positions on the policy have differed from time to time, there has been a general approach which contrasts Canadian integration with American assimilation. Living in New York as an undergraduate student, I soon came to realise that the melting pot was more myth than reality. Nevertheless, many of our neighbours to the south hold on to the ideal that all citizens of that country blend into one culture. The assimilationist model of the melting pot is a resilient belief that underlies the dominant American framing of intercultural relations. It is often contrasted with the Canadian preference for an integration process that resembles what some have called a ‘salad bowl’. The individual ingredients of the salad remain distinct but the dish has a composite wholeness.

However, several contributors to articles in the press tend to interpret ‘integration’ as the absorption of everyone into a monolithic culture. At the root of this notion are 19th-century ideas of the nation. In its ideal manifestation, everyone living within the territorial borders of a country was assumed to have the same language, culture, ethnicity, and religion. In fact, the ancient Greek word *ethnos*, from which the term ‘ethnic’ is derived, denotes ‘nation’. In reality, there has rarely been a territorial nation composed entirely of one ethnicity—within every state there have been minorities who do not have the same social characteristics as the dominant group. Nevertheless, the study of school curricula and media content has demonstrated that the presence of subordinate groups is systematically marginalised, demonised, or completely erased. As multiculturalism has spread around the world, it has been adapted to the individual contexts of the social and historical experience of various countries. Of course, the idea existed long before the

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name. Even in the form of policy, states like India, Malaysia, and Singapore have had their own ways to foster good relations between various collectivities that exist within their borders. Interestingly, even though they do not allow large-scale immigration, they are increasingly referring to their approaches as multicultural. The British, the Dutch, and, yes, even the Americans talk about multiculturalism—but it is not the same as that in Canada. Each country's approach is shaped by the context of its social policy and its sense of its national self.

States in North America and Australasia with long histories of receiving immigrants have a markedly different understanding of intercultural relations compared to the countries in Europe, which have only recently begun to take in newcomers. The United States does not have a multiculturalism policy at the federal level, but it is espoused by many municipal organizations as well as large corporations in America. Britain's approach, partly shaped by its history of resettling Commonwealth citizens, remains markedly distinct from that of other European countries. For its part, the Netherlands has incorporated multiculturalism into its long-standing 'pillarised,' social policy.

Some globally reported events that have occurred within the last few years in European states have been framed within the context of 'the failure of multiculturalism'. The murder in 2004 of a controversial Dutch filmmaker by a person of Moroccan origins was viewed as the inability of certain minorities to integrate into the Netherlands. British multiculturalism came under severe attack following the suicide bombings of the London transport system by four locally born individuals of Pakistani origins in 2005. Last year's controversy over the publication of derogatory images of the Prophet Muhammad by *Jyllands Posten*, a Danish newspaper, was framed as threatening Western liberal values. These events were

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presented by most pundits as evidence of a general failure of the policy to engage successfully with the racial and religious diversity of national populations.

The European incidents were reported in some Canadian media as reflecting on the flawed nature of our own approach to multiculturalism. But many commentators failed to place the incidents in the contexts of the particular ways in which pluralism operates in these countries. They tended to overlook the specific conditions that seem to foster systemic intercultural problems in those states. These include the rigid isolationism of certain minority communities in the UK and the fact that even academics in the Netherlands tend to refer to second- and third-generation Dutch-born persons of immigrant backgrounds as ‘foreigners’.

The well-known racist leanings of a political party in the Danish governing coalition, which had passed several anti-immigrant laws, and the continual attack by *Jyllands Posten* on minorities in the country did not form part of the dominant coverage of the cartoon furore. Perhaps one of the most unrealistic comparisons between Europe and Canada was a column in one of our newspapers which quoted a French government official warning us that our multiculturalism would lead to the kind of riots that his country faced in 2005. The failure of France’s economic policy in providing viable employment for its youth and the alienating effects of its rigorous insistence on public adherence to dominant cultural norms were not seen as the particular causes of its problems.

Whereas it is the job of the media to remain vigilant and to maintain a critical eye over society, it appears that the normative stance of many is constantly to demonstrate how multiculturalism is a disaster in the making. They tend to give very high profile to studies that may indicate that the policy is not working. One piece of research that enjoyed considerable coverage last year pointed to the growth in

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‘ethnic enclaves,’ in Canada. This is indeed of concern, but seems to have been a problem only in the context of visible minorities. Interestingly, the lack of ethnic diversity in upper-class neighbourhoods of our cities has not caused similar moral panics.

Exclusive enclaves of another kind are regularly displayed in the business pages of newspapers that print the photographs of individuals appointed to corporate executive positions. These seem to be invisible to the researchers and media commentators who are focused on the Canadians labelled ‘visible,’ minorities. But then that is the nature of the process by which certain peoples are racialised and others are not. The city of Vancouver is not a stranger to the discourse on ‘monster homes’. It is interesting to note that the moral panics about racialised groups seem not to be as intense when they live in enclaves that are within urban cores, with tourism brochures boasting of the exotic nature of our ‘Chinatowns’ and ‘Little Indias’. The alarms begin to sound when people from these places move to suburban locations. A related issue that should be mentioned here, but which remains outside the general scope of this talk, is the maintenance of another kind of racial enclave—Aboriginal reserves. An analytical framework that helps in making sense of this situation is that of the public sphere, first introduced by German sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1989).

His concept favoured a largely monolithic civic discourse derived from 18th-century Europe, where enlightened upper- and middle-class men conducted discussions about public affairs. This construct of the public sphere was challenged initially by feminist and, later, other scholars who sought to expand the notion to be more inclusive of gender, ethnic, and class differences. There has emerged the idea of ‘public sphericules,’ which are viewed as co-existing and intersecting with the dominant public sphere. They enable us to conceptualise the manner in which civic

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participation takes place in pluralist societies. The sphericules may include ethnic marketplaces and various houses of worship as well as ethnic media.

We cannot completely disregard the potential danger of ghettoisation and the isolation of individuals from public life. Some of my research has inquired into the Canada-related content in ethnic media. The findings revealed that the longer an ethnic medium has been in existence, the greater the proportion of information about Canada it carries on a regular basis. This also seems to be a factor of how long the community it serves has been present in this country. Some well-established ethnic papers in Vancouver were found to contain more material on a federal election campaign than a major local daily. This seems to parallel the multi-ethnic nature of participation in Canadian politics. It appears that some sphericules are vibrant and multidimensional spaces that are providing for substantial engagement in the civic life of our democratic state. However, this does not mean that all ethnic sphericules are similarly active in public life. We need to understand better the reasons for this through more precise insights.

Research needs to inquire into the opportunities as well as the inclinations that the occupants of sphericules have for engaging with or disengaging from Canadian society. Unfortunately, we cannot be certain that the media or even researchers themselves will report accurately on the findings of studies. A case in point is a major front-page story that was published in a national newspaper on January 12, 2007. It had the headline ‘How Canadian Are You?’ The lead read: “Visible-minority immigrants are slower to integrate into Canadian society than their white, European counterparts, and feel less Canadian, suggesting multiculturalism doesn’t work as well for non-whites, according to a landmark report” (Jimenez, 2007, p. A1).

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This prominent article generated considerable discussion and is viewed widely as providing scientific evidence on the issue. On January 18, the daily printed a letter to the editor with the title *Flawed Conclusion*:

“In their study on immigrants, Jeffrey Reitz and Rupa Bannerjee conclude that visible-minority immigrants are slower to integrate into Canadian society than their white, European counterparts. However, using the statistics in their report, it would be quite possible to come to the very opposite conclusion.

As one example, they exaggerate differences. They say 97 per cent of whites become citizens, compared with 79 per cent of visible-minority immigrants. However, most whites came to Canada much earlier. In fact, visible-minority immigrants are more likely to acquire citizenship than whites. And the described second-generation differences compare visible-minority kids, with an average age of 26, with middle-aged whites—with an average age of 46. The biggest problem is their conclusion. Across their ‘indices of integration,’ visible-minority immigrants do better than whites on more indices than they do worse:

Chinese do better than white immigrants on five, worse on one; South Asian, better on three, worse on two; black, better on four, worse on two; and ‘other visible minority’ immigrants, better on three, worse on two.

Their analyses, therefore, show the opposite of what they conclude. Finally, the ‘Canadian identity’ question was not ‘Do you identify as Canadian?’ as stated in

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your article. While Prof. Reitz and Mr. [sic] Banarjee interpret it that way, it was: ‘What is your ethnic or cultural identity?’—definitely not about national identity or allegiance”. (Palmer, 2007, p. A16).

Once again, we seem to be confused by the various parts of the elephant. There are multiple kinds of identity that a person has—for many people, national identity is very different from ethnic and cultural identities. Focus groups that I have carried out with Muslims of various backgrounds over the last few years, as well as interviews that a doctoral student of mine has conducted with South Asians more recently, have demonstrated that most of these first- and second-generation immigrants felt equally comfortable with their religious, ethnic, cultural, and Canadian identities. Our findings are consonant with a growing body of literature on this topic. But neither the researchers of the study nor the journalist seemed to understand that most people have a multilayered sense of self. It appears that the daily was keen to display prominently the supposed evidence showing that immigrants were failing to integrate.

Despite the letter that challenged the story, the reporting of the study has taken a life of its own and has served to extend the public impression about the failure of multiculturalism.

While some Canadians seem to be set on announcing the death of the policy, this country’s efforts to foster intercultural harmony continue to be admired internationally. A constant stream of politicians, scholars, and journalists comes to examine the applications of Canadian multiculturalism. Perhaps the strongest endorsement comes from His Highness the Aga Khan. Speaking from the experience of leading a development network in Africa and Asia for the last 50 years, he finds

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in pluralism the means to enable people of varied backgrounds to strive towards common purposes. Upon establishing the Global Centre for Pluralism with the Canadian government in 2006, he stated that pluralist values and practices were not merely desirable but had become absolutely essential for the future of the world and our very survival (Aga Khan, 2006).

He has also remarked that Canadians tend to be very modest about their achievements in this area. Canadian multiculturalism does have significant flaws, but it is clear that when we look around the world we realise that Canadians would be worse off without it. It is not only the cases of Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Iraq with which Canada compares so favourably; it has also avoided the kinds of rioting and social upheaval that periodically tend to shake the societies that have the closest ties to Canada—the USA, Britain, and France. But this is no cause to be smug; multiculturalism has not fully succeeded in addressing racial discrimination. Social cohesion also continues to be a challenge.

The world is changing, and multiculturalism is beginning to show its age. The policy was designed in a time when immigrants maintained little contact with their places of origin. Globalisation, communications technologies, and relatively cheaper air transport have changed that. Immigrant communities are much more mobile and cosmopolitan than they were three decades ago. It is possible now for newcomers to maintain daily contact with their respective diasporas through the Internet, and to travel frequently between the new and old countries.

This has huge implications for citizenship. The nature of national belonging is undergoing transformation in many parts of the world. There are multiple levels of citizenship in the European Union. In fact, many Canadians who were either themselves born in Europe or whose parents or even grandparents came from there

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have obtained EU passports. Italy's national election rules enable members of parliament to be drawn from its diaspora, including Italian-Canadians. The governments of Israel and India have designated cabinet ministers to oversee the implementation of their respective diaspora policies. Whereas migrant-producing countries have moved ahead to develop mechanisms to engage across national borders with their diasporas, immigrant-receiving countries have yet to address this issue.

It is clear that Canada will have to engage sooner rather than later in an international discussion about the implications of transnational diasporas for immigration, citizenship, foreign policy, and security. Multiculturalism policy seems to be out of step with these developments. It was designed primarily to ensure the development of a common citizenship that made room for cultural differences. The framework in which this policy would unfold was that of the nation.

Whereas globalisation has not eliminated the existence of nations, it has certainly set in motion processes which are challenging their traditional structures. The global networks of diasporas behoove us to revisit a multiculturalism that operates only within the confines of single countries. Unfortunately, those of our pundits who remain captivated by narrow understandings of multiculturalism have difficulty seeing the evolving nature of the animal.

The discussions on the policy have to engage imaginatively and creatively with 21st-century realities. It is important that journalists, scholars, and policymakers step back from the elephant and see the rapidly changing global environment. Even as we continue to disagree on the merits of multiculturalism, it is critical for our common

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future that we not limit ourselves to thinking within the box of the nation-state in planning for a more harmonious Canada.

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