

Race and Ethnicity in the Context of Multiculturalism as State Policy*



In the aftermath of World War II, millions of Europeans were left displaced. Canada selected immigrants from displaced persons camps to enter the country to work. In the 1960s, however, immigration trends shifted from European immigrants to immigrants from developing southern nations. What was Canada's response to this? Given new diversity within the nation, how did state policy change in the subsequent decades?*

*Looking at the years between the 1960 to 1999. **It should be noted that racialized people resided in Canada prior to the 1960s.

The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism

In the post-war world, Canada was in search of a new national identity.

Meanwhile, Indigenous peoples were pushing for decolonization and French Canadians started a separatist movement in Quebec. Both groups were viewed as threats to the state and federalism.

The Bi & Bi Commission was established to provide recommendations to develop Canadian Confederation on the basis of equal partnership between "the two founding nations": Britain and France.

The scope of the commission was later expanded to include the study of contributions of other ethnic minorities.

The outcome of the commission was the Multiculturalism Policy (1971), followed by the Multiculturalism Act (1988).

The Multiculturalism Act (1988)

Objectives:

1. To acknowledge the freedom of cultural choice for all Canadians
2. To recognize & promote multiculturalism as a fundamental characteristic of Canada
3. To promote equitable participation of individuals & communities of all origins
4. To enhance the development of communities sharing a common origin
5. To ensure equal treatment & protection of all individuals while respecting their diversity
6. To encourage & assist social institutions to be respectful & inclusive of Canada's multicultural character
7. To promote understanding of intergroup relations
8. To foster the recognition & appreciation of diverse Canadian cultures
9. To preserve & enhance non-official languages while strengthening official languages
10. To advance multiculturalism in harmony with a bilingual framework

1960s



- Beginning in the 1960s, new regulations were implemented to end overt and formal racism in immigration policies. However, discrimination persisted.
- 1963: The Bi and Bi Commission was established.
- The Canadian economy required technical and skilled labour, and Europe's economic recovery reduced European immigration.
- Fewer people immigrated to Canada from Europe and more people immigrated from Asia, Africa, Latin American, and the Caribbean.
- 1967: An "objective" point system was introduced. Immigration to Canada became based on education, skills and resources.

1970s and 1980s

- Amid challenges posed by various movements for decolonization, ethnic nationalism, and Quebec separatism, the Canadian government sought to appease ethnic minorities by introducing the 1971 Multiculturalism Policy to redistribute social status among linguistic and ethnocultural groups.
- The government funded efforts to include the histories of ethnic minorities as a nation building process. Culture is celebrated, but the dominant group holding power remains Anglo-Saxon Canadians.
- Starting in the 1970s, temporary workers mainly arrived from developing southern nations. Seasonal workers are brought to Canada under stricter legal control.
- 1983: Measures were implemented to ensure workers are married and their families remain in their country of origin to prevent permanent immigration.
- 1988: The Multiculturalism Act came into effect.

1990s



- By the 1990s, immigration to Canada was no longer dominated by European immigrants, as it was prior to the 1960s.
- Immigrants from developing countries greatly contributed to Canada's post-war economic boom.
- By 1993, 51.08% of immigrants came from Asia & the Pacific; 14.31% from Africa & the Middle East; 13.28% from South and Central America; 3.14% from the US; 18.19% from Europe..

However, racial and ethnic discrimination remained present. Please refer to the two examples of racial discrimination and erasure on the next page! Both cases demonstrate how by the 1990s, multiculturalism had failed to create substantial change in the public and media's perception of Canadian society and cultural norms.

Multiculturalism as State Policy: The Role of Race in Education and the Media



Although Canada had included multiculturalism as a state policy, have ethnic and racial minorities been provided with equal representation and power by the 1990s? Was this reflected in the education system? How had the media portrayed violence against racialized Canadians? Let's look at two examples.

Speak It! From the Heart of Black Nova Scotia



- Speak It! is a 1992 documentary film about a group of Black Nova Scotian students who faced discrimination at their school.
- The students were not taught about Black Canadian history and culture. Black Canadian history was also reduced to a page and a half in their school textbook.
- The students believed the teachers thought the school was a racism-free environment, yet the education system focused and was suited to white people, history and culture.
- They took the initiative to create their own educational and cultural programs and activities to promote and better understand Black history and culture.
- How could a "multicultural" nation neglect the history of ethnic and racial minorities in the education system?

- Reena Virk was a fourteen year old girl killed in Victoria by her peers in November 1997.
- Seven girls and one boy harassed and beat her. After serious injury, Virk was drowned by the group.
- The media portrayed the murder as "girl-on-girl" violence.
- Virk was of South Asia origin, but issues of racism, sexism, pressures of assimilation, and the social construction of Virk as an outcast were rarely addressed.
- When described as an outcast, her appearance (weight and height) was emphasized.
- Her social exclusion based on white supremacy was ignored.
- By focusing on "girl-on-girl" violence, the media negated any further discussion of racism or confrontation with the impacts of racism and the patriarchy on racialized girls.
- Race was determined to not be an issue in the court case, and this denial fits within the context of systemic racism in Canada (and such racism being downplayed or ignored).

Reena Virk

Key Points and Final Remarks

- After the 1960s, immigration reflected the nation's economic needs. Canada sought immigrants to fulfill labour shortages in often undesirable positions.
- The labour market was segregated along racial lines. Racialized Canadians faced higher rates of unemployment and poverty.
- Multiculturalism was formed as a part of state policy to keep social relations in place. Multiculturalism was used as a political device to undermine decolonization and separatism, appease other minorities, and as a national legitimizing principle.
- Multiculturalism did not change the fundamental bases of ethnic and racial inequality in Canada. The primary concern of the government was national unity rather than improved policy, funding, and legislation.
- Anglo-Saxon Canadians were still overrepresented in elite positions in economic, political and cultural life due to networks of influence. Multiculturalism reconstructed white power structures in a palatable manner.
- The media and popular discourses have ignored racism which corresponds with how Canadians view themselves and the nation. Canadians view themselves and the nation as accepting and multicultural. The reality is much different, and by claiming a multicultural identity, Canadians are able to ignore ongoing racialized discrimination and injustice.
- Racialized Canadians still faced ongoing discrimination in social, economic and political spheres.
- Multiculturalism reflected a symbolic equality rather than material equality. (Cultures celebrated without power actually being distributed).
- Multiculturalism created a rhetoric of equality while acts of racism and the history of racism in Canada remain ignored.



Sources

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