

Ethical Leadership on Polarization, “Otherness” and the Core Values of a Liberal, Democratic Society

A Concept Paper¹

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Last revised – July 3, 2008

1.0 Introduction

As is so often observed, Canada is a country of extraordinary diversity. Only a small percentage of the population² is aboriginal; the vast majority of Canadians either were born elsewhere or are descended from people who came to this land at some point over the last few hundred years, many quite recently.

Canada is often pointed to as a model of how a highly diverse population can live together peacefully. It is certainly true that, comparatively, Canada does well on this score and our diversity is indeed a source of great strength and vitality. But the picture has never been as pretty as many from a distance might have viewed it, and it is clear that our ever higher degrees of diversity are now presenting some serious challenges.

For many people the tipping point occurred in 2004 when the government of Ontario appeared to be on the verge of giving legal force to arbitrations based on sharia, a Muslim legal system which – amongst other things – severely discounts the evidentiary value of testimony given by women. Although alarm bells should have gone off earlier – because religious-based arbitration had been going on in the province for years – it was then that many Canadians started to ask: in a country which guarantees everyone, including women, the equal benefit and protection of the law, how could it possibly have come to this?

¹ The Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership intends to launch a multi-year effort to address aspects of polarization, “otherness” and the core values of a liberal, democratic society. This Concept Paper articulates some of the problems to be addressed, our reasons for believing these problems to be vitally important and some of the directions in which this work will go.

² By any account, less than 5 %.

2.0 Polarization in Canadian society

There are many different ways to approach the growing challenges presented by diversity in Canada. We have chosen to begin our work in this area by focusing on polarization, the misunderstandings which perpetuate it and the ethical implications of a polarization based on narrow ideas about identity.

It seems we are increasingly often faced with conflicts between groups which have serious difficulty dealing with each other. Think for example of the tensions between gay rights advocates and fundamentalist religions. Instead of seeing each other as fellow members of one society or community, each sees only “the other”, a group of people so different – so lacking in shared experience, values or the like – as to make civil or constructive exchange pointless. This does not always work both ways; sometimes one side is more willing than the other to try to engage. But often the reluctance is mutual: neither side sees meaningful engagement with “the other” as possible. The sides seem to be talking – if at all – past each other. Genuine communication is missing.

It is indisputable: Canadians have made a commitment to diversity. Nevertheless, we are not dealing with diversity well enough. Without effective engagement across divides, we are not functioning as one community, but as groups (sub-communities) isolated from one another. Amongst the other problems caused by this fracturing of society, the quality of our democracy is diminished as compared with what it could be. Instead of a more engaged, deliberative democracy, we function as what Daniel Weinstock has called an “aggregative” democracy, casting our ballots on the basis of our separate points of view and governed then by what falls out of the vote counting, with little sense of community.

3.0 Causes of polarization and hostility to “the other”

Arguably, one of the most important causes of the polarization to which we point is the increasing tendency of Canadians to identify themselves primarily with what are inherently and often intentionally divisive characteristics, such as ethnicity, race or religion. It is fair to ask why this is happening. And no doubt some of our work in this area will address the issue. But given that this is occurring, we have also to ask, why in any event there is such hostility to “the other”.

We doubt there is a unique cause for these hostile reactions to people different from us. Instead, there seems to be a variety of causes. Fear is a common one, and sometimes fear takes the form of an insecurity about ourselves. For example, people of a different sexual orientation may make us feel insecure about our own sexual identity and because we do not want to acknowledge that insecurity, we reject “the other” as inferior, as not worthy of concern.

Fear of change is no doubt another important source of insecurity. Many in the majority see society as changing in ways that are beyond their control and the insecurity caused by this erosion of the familiar leads to hostility towards those who are apparently to blame for that change.

Guilt too, perversely enough, can be a cause of hostility towards “the other”. Arguably, we can see this sometimes at work in Canada today where some in the mainstream evidence hostility towards aboriginal people: it looks like some non-aboriginals cannot bear the sight of our society’s failure to deal justly with aboriginal people, so they refuse to “see” them at all.

Scape-goating is another means by which hostility to “the other” is generated. Many times through history one segment of a society has deliberately sought to divert attention from the real source of a problem – for example, incompetent governance – by blaming an innocent, but vulnerable, group. Some of the worst human rights abuses – for example, the Holocaust – have been the result of scape-goating.

Factors, such as fear, guilt and scape-goating, not only cause hostility towards “the other”; they also impede efforts to overcome that hostility. Understanding the reasons for this hostility and for the polarization, which is at least in part fueled by it, may help us find ways to establish a healthier sense of community.

4.0 Leadership on “otherness”

As we see it, hostility to “the other” is damaging and conflicts resulting from our diversity present increasingly serious public policy challenges. We note too an absence of thoughtful leadership on these issues. Leaders in both the public and private realms address aspects of the problem from time to time, but usually only when forced to by crisis, not in any systemic way and not in a way which helps people deal better with it.

Most even well-intentioned leaders are poorly equipped to help guide the kinds of discussions we think are needed on “otherness” issues. Indeed, some leaders – not the well-intentioned – are even ready to exploit polarization for their own gain, by scape-goating vulnerable groups, as noted above.

It is clear that both leaders and the public at large need help in thinking through the public policy dimensions of “otherness” so that a more ethical leadership on these issues can be exercised.

5.0 What kinds of “otherness” do we have in mind?

The Foundation’s work on “otherness” will address a broad range of differences, diversity or “otherness”. Indeed, we are tempted to say that wherever we see one group in society treating another group as “the other”, we have an instance of the problem with which we are concerned. “The other” is the very person, or group, with which we have trouble engaging in meaningful discussion about differences of opinion. Potentially any difference might fall within this range – from ethnic and racial, to religious, to political, or to that based on sexual orientation or gender. To be clear, while religious differences and religious fundamentalism are contributing greatly to the strains of diversity, in our view they are not by any means the only sources of the problem.

Extreme economic diversity – in the sense of the growing gap between rich and poor, both within countries and globally – cannot be ignored in the context of “otherness”. Indeed, we understand that poverty interacts with all, or at least most, of the categories of difference we plan to address. In general, poor people have a more difficult time coping with the disadvantages of being treated as “the other” by mainstream society; there are fewer options open to them, and they may be more drawn to identifying themselves as “the other”, because they do not benefit from the economy and from mainstream social and political institutions in the way that the majority does. Our work on “otherness” will examine these social justice issues where they are relevant.

6.0 The intellectual framework we bring to the task

First and foremost, we approach these issues with a deep commitment to what we see as the essential elements of a liberal, democratic society. These include the rule of

law, the traditional civil liberties – such as freedom of expression and freedom of religion and individual liberty – a clear division between church and state, freedom from discrimination and the equal benefit and protection of the law and other public institutions. We realize that these ideals are not consistently achieved in Canada, but believe that without a sturdy commitment to them and their realization, a highly diverse society (indeed, probably any society) cannot thrive.

We also understand that these elements are the only ones necessary to ensuring a healthy society. But we do claim – for many of the same reasons as have been articulated by progressive political thinkers over the centuries – they are necessary.

We further understand that these essential elements, ideals or core values can sometimes point in opposite directions. For example, we often see a tension between freedom of expression and religious liberty. Members of some religious groups have demanded that criticisms of their religion, such as the cartoons critical of the prophet Mohammed, should be banned because they are harmful to their interests. Or the remarks of gay rights advocates may be attacked as hate speech and even perhaps illegal by the members of the religious community whose apparently homophobic views are the subject of those remarks.

It has long been known that democratic values can come into conflict with one another, as these examples illustrate. But there are better and worse ways of resolving such conflicts: a way forward has to be found that supports those institutions that have been shown to nurture human dignity in the long run. It seems to us, for example, that freedom of speech is one of those institutions. Yes, it is necessary sometimes to curtail speech: it is a good thing that it is illegal to yell “fire” in a crowded theatre (if there is no fire). But because the vigorous exchange of competing views lies at the heart of an open and democratic society, speech should be limited only when absolutely necessary.

Perhaps what distinguishes the approach we take most clearly is that we explicitly reject ethical relativism. That is, we reject the view that people from one group cannot make moral judgments about the traditions, practices or ways of life of another. It would appear that many Canadians think otherwise. For example, quite a few people seem to think that we should not label the treatment women receive in certain minority ethnic or religious groups (think here of female circumcision, for a particularly dramatic example)

as “wrong”, because those practices are part of “their” culture and “we” have, therefore, no right to criticize them.

In a recent review of Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s book Inferno, Theodore Dalrymple refers to “the shallow view that all cultural beliefs are compatible and none is better than any other.” As Dalrymple notes, this is an attractive position for it excuses us from making what could be uncomfortable judgments: he says, “This is a view gratifying to those who hold it, for it assures them that they are open- and generous- minded, but it is a self-satisfaction bought at the price of the suffering of others ...”³ It is, indeed, a dangerous view because subscription to it allows a person to hide from the difficult truth that some views are ethically better than others.

The problem with relativism is not only that it leaves many oppressed without our help, as Dalrymple suggests – for what is there to help with, if there is nothing wrong? The more fundamental problem is that it does not make sense. If ethics are just relative to cultural group and my group says it is just fine to hold slaves, then there can be no criticism of our slave-holding from anyone outside our group, because our ethics are our ethics and yours are yours. But no one actually believes any such thing: when we consider the arguments against slavery, we can agree that it is just wrong, regardless of cultural background. Other extreme examples, such as, torture and abuse of innocents, evoke the same response. So ethics are not relative, and we proceed from that bedrock principle.

Again, in the interests of clarity, it follows from a rejection of relativism that there are limits to the diversity which can be accepted by any society: some things are ethically right and some are not. We indeed want to embrace diversity, but not diversity that is ethically damaging.

But if ethics are not relative, it follows that some ethical positions are better than others. How then do we sort the better views from the others? This is indeed a complicated matter. To start: even if we cannot always say what is right, we can often say what is wrong and identify what better and worse alternatives would look like. Consider gender equality in Afghanistan: what is the ethically right policy for the current Afghan government to adopt regarding women’s rights (assuming good intentions),

³ See “A feminist for the ages”, The Globe and Mail, Saturday, March 17, 2007, p. D4.

acknowledging that there is tremendous resistance in the country to relatively full equality, such as we find in, say, Iceland or Sweden?

We know that the position of women under Taliban rule was clearly wrong. And we can say that, the more freedom and equality afforded women in Afghanistan, the better. But given the continuing strength of extremely conservative elements in the country – which regularly use brutal violence to keep control over women – exactly which policy measures should be actively pursued is probably impossible to define. Trial and error reform in the direction of increased rights for women may be the only ethically defensible policy at this point.

We can also never forget the possibility of ethical regression. As Thomas Jefferson so famously said, “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance”. Some of the gains made in western democracies – such as recognition of the importance of a sharp division between church and state – cannot be taken for granted and in fact are currently under attack in many western countries. Some of the Foundation’s work on “otherness” will highlight vulnerable aspects of our liberal democracies and argue for the necessity of shoring up our commitments to these essential principles.

7.0 Where, specifically, do we see dysfunctional “otherness” as presenting itself?

We look at “otherness” in a very broad way, because we think it necessary to do so. However, most people do not think about “otherness”, but instead are concerned with specific manifestations of it, to which they would never think to attach a label as abstract as “otherness”. So, it may be useful to list some of the clusters of issues or sub-issues which we see as needing to be addressed. The following is not meant to be exhaustive.

7.1 Barriers to communication about diversity or otherness

There are very significant barriers to communication across difference. For example, one group may be so sure its views are right that there appears to be no basis for dialogue. Certainly some of the stand-offs amongst religious groups are of this type. And there are cases where the “other” is so marginalized (for example, the poor or aboriginal people) that we do not even “see” them, let alone “hear” them. These barriers and others like them need to be addressed in order that we can better overcome them.

7.2 Freedom of speech and constructive engagement with “the other”

Efforts to deal with “otherness” inevitably run up against freedom of expression issues. Many see a conflict between the need to protect free speech and the obligation to treat others with respect. For example, does showing respect for others entail a prohibition on criticism? Does respect for Islam as a major religious tradition mean no criticism of it is permissible? No – but this question, others like it and the concept of “respect” merit a thorough public examination.

7.3 The artificiality of identity politics and the creation of difference

There are strong forces at work pushing people to identify themselves, or let themselves be identified, on a very narrow, often cultural, ethnic or religious, basis. For example, the tendency to think in polarized terms – “you’re either with us or against us” – automatically leads to the construction of “sides”, requiring a defining characteristic to sort “us” from “them” – gay from straight, Muslim from non-Muslim, even more specific, such as, Shia from Sunni, and so on. On identity politics, one trait becomes the basis for a person’s identity to the exclusion of others one would have thought important to self-concept, such as profession. I am no longer a lawyer, mother, daughter, cross-country skier, avid reader, or Russophile, but first and foremost (and, at its worst, only) a “WASP”.

In Canada, it is sometimes said the move to identity politics may have been exacerbated by official, multiculturalism policy, which rewards the “boxing” of people into narrowly defined categories with government funding.

7.4 The role of religion in the public life of a multi-cultural society

It is clear to us that in multi-cultural societies such as Canada or the US, where human rights – such as freedom of religion and freedom of conscience – are taken seriously, the adhesive which keeps us together must be a secular glue. We will not find the answers to problems of “otherness” within religion.

Indeed, the role of religion generally in multi-cultural societies is not a religious issue and cannot be decided within a religious framework. It is a policy question to be

debated in the public arena. For example, public education systems are often pressured by religious groups to refrain from teaching material that conflicts with their beliefs. It could be fundamentalist Christians protesting the teaching of evolution or Muslims rejecting curriculum on the Holocaust or any one of many other possibilities. Clear thinking is necessary on how public policy is to respond best to these challenges.

Another example, comes from policing. Many of us were pleased by the decision some years ago that allowed Sikh members of the RCMP to wear their turbans instead of regular issue hats. But other Canadians continue to feel that the turban represents an inappropriate intrusion of religion into a public institution.

We note that the debate over the role of religion in Canadian public life is seldom explicitly engaged with. When it does occur, it is usually confused and unproductive. The issues demand much better treatment.

7.5 Diversity and citizenship

There is a tension between wanting to accommodate diversity – a hallmark of a modern, multi-cultural society – and the desire of many minorities to retain culture and language, on the one hand, and what is necessary to fulfilling one’s duties as a citizen, on the other. At a fairly simplistic level, we can understand that if a person does not master the language of public, political discourse (in Canada, either English or French), then he or she is incapable of carrying out even the most basic of civic duties, such as informed voting.

But the demands of citizenship are greater and the diversity-related problems in this area both more varied and serious than the language competency issue would suggest. It has been argued, for example, that as soon as a debate begins to take on an “identity” flavour (for example, “I have to wear the veil because it is integral to who I am, to my identity”) compromise – crucial to successful democracy – becomes more difficult.

7.6 Divisiveness, otherness and politics

Divisiveness in politics is especially threatening to our democratic processes. We see an increasing tendency to refuse engagement with political opinions different from

our own. In the political realm, the view that “you are either with us or against us” is creating a more bitter and rigid partisanship than was earlier the case. It used to be more possible for people of differing views to engage with each other in ways that could produce useful compromise. Now, the “political other” is more likely to be either avoided or attacked, sometimes quite viciously, with the result that political opinion is more polarized than it might otherwise be and politics more a “winner-takes-all” dog-fight, rather than an on-going debate.⁴

And as already noted, some political leaders are ready to exacerbate polarization by pitting one group against another for personal gain.

7.7 Diversity and equity

There is a very real question of how social justice issues – in particular, poverty – help to create or perpetuate the dysfunctional aspects of otherness and limit our ability to deal with that dysfunction. People who have worked closely with immigrants for a long time say that their clients experience greater problems with finding well-paying work than used to be the case and that this significantly undermines their ability and willingness to assimilate to Canadian culture. Indeed, a flash point for discussions of diversity and multiculturalism in Canada is recognition of foreign credentials, which has clear implications for both economic fairness and how favourably immigrants view the society to which they have come.

The logic of the situation would seem clear: when immigrants do not enjoy the benefits of the new country, all other things being equal, they are going to be less willing to take on the burdens of immigration, which include making the effort to adopt the values (for example, gender equality) of their new homeland. This is a factual not a normative statement: to make this observation is not to condone anyone’s rejection of gender equality. If gender equality is a core Canadian (indeed, Western) value – which certainly looks to be the case – then a person’s failure to honour it is, for our shared, public purposes, a problem which should not be ignored.

7.8 Understanding the limits of accommodation

⁴ Thanks to Dan Shapiro for this characterization of divisive politics.

There is great tension around the *perceived* conflict between the broadly accepted right to be free from discrimination and the notion that there will always be limits to accommodation of difference. There is no real conflict because, if we are to have any kind of standards for any kind of activity, then there will always *have* to be limits to accommodation. For example, the fundamentalist Christian who wants to major in biology, but does not want to study evolution, should probably choose another profession. Would a university really issue a biology degree to someone who did not understand (this is not even to say “accept”) evolutionary theory?

On the other hand, every sincere claim for accommodation should be carefully examined in the hopes that accommodation can be extended: we want to accommodate difference to the maximum possible extent, but what is “possible” is not a straightforward matter and deserves serious discussion as part of our work on “otherness”.

7.9 Gender equity and diversity

One of the areas in which the limits of accommodation must be thoroughly examined is that of gender equity. As we noted at the outset of this discussion paper, when Canadians learned what was being done in Ontario by way of religious-based arbitration and that it was planned to extend that arbitration to sanction the application of sharia law, we saw widespread astonishment that accommodation of diversity could have proceeded in a way that threatens women’s rights to equality before the law.

7.10 Learning from the experience of other countries

Canada is not the only western country facing pressing issues related to “otherness”. So, as always there is the need to look abroad to see what can be learned. For example, the Dutch now explicitly address some issues of women’s and gay rights with prospective immigrants to assess whether they understand the society to which they say they want to come. Whether this would be appropriate in Canada is a reasonable question.

But it is critical that, in looking to foreign experience, we are clear on how the Canadian situation is both similar to and different from that in other countries. For example, we share much with the US in this context, as the population of both countries

is overwhelmingly constituted of people whose families came from elsewhere. But at least at the level of rhetoric, the American ideal of the “melting pot” has been quite different from our “cultural mosaic”. And because the US is a superpower engaged in some very dubious exercises of its military power, such as the war in Iraq, Canadians should be wary of thinking we are in the same boat as Americans in dealing with the problems associated with “otherness”.

And the fact that many people in western European countries have a quite specific image of what makes for a, say, “real” German or authentic French person is one that should distinguish Canada’s situation. It is not that Canada is free of such racistly rigid ideas (there is unfortunately plenty of racism in Canada), but arguably they are less prevalent here and certainly the multicultural ideal we have held up for ourselves is missing in many Old World countries. Many of us may be racist (sexist or the like), but most of us understand that we should not be and that our political and legal institutions formally rejected discrimination quite some time ago.

8.0 What do we hope to accomplish with our work on “otherness”?

The goals of the Foundation’s work on “otherness” are two-fold. First, we intend to expand and improve the public discussion of “otherness” issues. Our activities in this area will offer opportunities to the public to engage with “otherness” issues that would not otherwise have arisen. Those opportunities will be offered in a variety of forms, from small group discussions to larger public events, such as symposia. And we will improve the debates on “otherness” through our willingness to engage with issues that others typically avoid – such as the role of religion in a multicultural society – and our greater awareness of crucial conceptual matters, such as the incoherency of ethical relativism.

Second, we intend to try to influence public policy in this area. We expect to do so indirectly through the stimulation of public discussion already described. But we also hope to engage policy makers more directly by inviting them to consult on the design of the Project, to participate in Foundation activities which address “otherness” issues and to provide feedback on work of the Foundation in this area.

We want policy makers to view us as allies in the pursuit of better public policy on these matters. If we succeed in this endeavour, we will have a greater chance of having influence.