

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

Concept Paper for the Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership Symposium
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QUESTIONS for discussion appear in text boxes like this one throughout the Paper.

Canada is often pointed to as a model of how a highly diverse population can live together peacefully. Comparatively, Canada does well on this score and our diversity is a source of great strength and vitality. But the picture is not always as pretty as it may seem, and our ever higher degrees of diversity sometimes present serious challenges.

1.0 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 polarization based on narrow ideas about identity.

It seems we are increasingly 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 and values – as to make civil or constructive communication pointless.

This polarization may well explain the overly quick resort to filing human rights complaints or court cases against what the “Other” has been saying. Other means of resolving differences are not seen as fruitful.

QUESTION: Do you agree that Canadian society has become more polarized in recent years? If so, where do you see that happening? What are some examples of polarization that concern you?

2.0 Who is the “Other”?

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.

QUESTION: If you agree that there are important issues concerning diversity in Canada, which kinds of diversity do you think are giving rise to those issues?

3.0 The Canadian commitment to diversity

Canadian society has made a significant commitment to diversity, but arguably 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. 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 with little sense of community.

QUESTION: Do you sense that there is fear of diversity in Canadian society? If so, where does that fear come from? What do you think causes it?

4.0 The approach taken by the Chumir Foundation

The Chumir Foundation approaches 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, 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. We understand that these ideals are not consistently achieved in Canada, but believe that without a sturdy commitment to achieving them, a highly diverse society (indeed, probably any society) cannot thrive.

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. In several recent cases, 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.

How do we establish priorities when democratic values come into conflict with one another? There is no one solution – no “one size fits all” response to possible conflicts of this kind.

But still, there are better and worse ways of resolving such conflicts. We think that a way forward has to be found that supports those institutions that have been shown to nurture human dignity in the long run. Freedom of speech is one of those institutions. 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, freedom of speech should be maximized and limited only when clearly necessary.

Perhaps what distinguishes the approach we take most clearly is that we 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. This is a dangerous view because it allows a person to hide from the difficult truth that some views are ethically better than others.

Because we reject relativism, we think that it is legitimate for people from other cultures to criticize us – for example, for our over-consumption of non-renewable resources (such as oil and gas) – just as it is legitimate for us to criticize, for example, the rampant corruption in their countries.

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.

QUESTION: Is what the Foundation is saying regarding relativism clear and understandable to you? Do you agree with our point of view? If not, why?

5.0 What are some of the specific issues we see?

5.1 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.

QUESTION: Do you agree that there are groups in Canadian society which are so marginalized that most Canadians don’t really see them at all? If so, who are they?

5.2 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. But we think that showing respect for others does not prohibit

criticism. Quite the opposite actually: to enter into a debate shows that you are taking the other side seriously and not just ignoring their views.

QUESTION: It seems to us not that Canadians talk too much or too openly about controversial issues – such as, the way some minorities treat women – but that we don’t talk enough or sufficiently openly about such things. Because we don’t, newcomers actually have a harder time, than they would otherwise, figuring out what Canadian social mores are. What do you think about this? Do you agree that we need more talk and debate, even though this would mean greater risk of offense? If you disagree, then how do you recommend we establish an understanding amongst newcomers of what Canadian society and law demands, e.g., regarding the treatment of women?

5.3 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. The tendency to think in polarized terms automatically leads to the construction of “sides”, requiring a defining characteristic to sort “us” from “them.” On identity politics, one trait becomes the basis for a person’s identity to the exclusion of others that are very important to self-concept, such as family status or profession.

5.4 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” from inside 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 any one of many other possibilities. Clear thinking is necessary on how public policy is to respond best to these challenges.

QUESTION: Do you agree that the question of the role of religion in the public sphere – for example, whether the Legislative Assembly should start its proceedings with a prayer – is not a religious question, but a political one?

5.5 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. 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.

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

QUESTION: Do you think that too much attention is paid to whether immigrants or refugees come to see themselves as Canadians quickly, or more slowly?

5.6 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 that precludes useful compromise, with the result that political opinion is more polarized than it might otherwise be and politics more a “winner-takes-all” dog-fight than an on-going, civilized debate.

QUESTION: Do you agree that divisiveness and polarization have increased in Canadian politics over recent years and are damaging our democratic processes?

5.7 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.

QUESTION: Do you think there would be fewer complaints by people from “diverse” groups (that is, people from outside the mainstream) that they are not being accommodated properly, if poverty were not so prevalent amongst these groups?

5.8 The limits of accommodation

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 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 (let alone “believe in it”), should probably choose another profession.

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 straight-forward matter and deserves serious discussion.

5.9 Gender equity and diversity

One of the areas in which the limits of accommodation must be thoroughly examined is that of gender equity. For example, when Canadians learned what was being done in Ontario by way of religion-based divorce 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 ever have been permitted to threaten the rights of women to equality before the law.

QUESTION: Does the tension between women’s equality and accommodation of religious and cultural difference worry you? If so, can you give examples that illustrate your concern?

6.0 Conclusion

We would like to hear from you about your thoughts on the issues noted in this paper or on other, related concerns. We will take your input into account when planning subsequent events on diversity issues.