

## **Multiculturalism key to Canadian unity**

**One of the crucial challenges Canada faces is to ensure that minorities feel like they belong, says Frank Iacobucci**

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*This is a partial text of a speech delivered last night by former Supreme Court justice, the Hon. Frank Iacobucci, chairman of Torstar's board of directors. He was addressing the Canadian Unity Council dinner in Toronto.*

In discussing the challenge and promise for Canadian unity, I would like to focus on the importance of minorities in the question of Canadian unity. I will discuss the challenge — and tremendous importance — of ensuring that minorities feel like they belong in Canadian society, of ensuring that minorities actively participate in society.

By strengthening the constituent parts and groups that make up this great country, we will strengthen Canada as a whole.

By supporting the values of pluralism, we will ensure that we have a country that all Canadians can take pride in and will want to unite in preserving and protecting it. In short, by supporting the values of diversity, we will ensure that the future is a better place for everyone.

Canada has come a long way over the years in terms of recognizing the value and importance of cultural diversity.

Canada's choice of a model of cultural pluralism — where Canadians are encouraged to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage with the rest of the country — as opposed to the melting pot, adopted in the United States and other nations, is significant. Under this policy, Canada's different cultures join together to form a mosaic, with each unique part contributing to a unified whole.

Accordingly, unity in Canada does not mean uniformity. Instead, Canadians are united in their recognition of the importance of diversity to the growth and development of the nation.

The goal of multiculturalism is to build both personal and collective confidence among members of all ethnic groups and to promote their participation in society.

The principle of multiculturalism has also been enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Supreme Court of Canada and the courts of our country generally have referred to section 27 of the Charter and the importance of multiculturalism in a number of cases. In one of these cases, my former colleague, Justice Peter Cory, and I said the following:

"It is perhaps an indication of the genius of Canada and Canadians that the supreme law of the land would recognize the existence of multiculturalism in our country and encourage its enhancement. Our country has benefited from and has been enriched by the efforts and accomplishments of Canadians of many different races, religions and nationalities. The recognition of multiculturalism is an attempt to achieve the epitome of democratic societies."

The Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which was passed in 1988, also discusses the ideal of multiculturalism and articulates a number of its objectives toward this goal.

The equality section 15 of our Charter of Rights and Freedoms articulates even more forcefully the importance of protecting and promoting equal treatment and prohibiting discrimination.

Thus far, I have focused only on the ideal as reflected in the legal framework of multiculturalism in Canada.

However, while Canada has certainly come a long way in committing itself to the basic values of diversity and equality, we have not yet reached this ideal and we still face many challenges.

In the last six months, I have been working intensively on seeking a resolution of Canada's Indian Residential School legacy. I am proud of the agreement in principle announced Wednesday in Ottawa. But I mention this not for that reason but to underscore that in my speaking of minorities I do not wish to overlook the immense issues facing our aboriginal peoples. In my opinion if we don't resolve these issues the consequences will be most serious.

All of this is to say that the law on our indigenous people and minorities, enlightened as it is in many respects, is necessary but not sufficient. Let me explain why.

Recent survey results by professor Jeffrey Reitz are very worrying. They show that even though we have legal protections in place to recognize the importance of cultural diversity and to ensure legal equality, in practice, many visible minorities still experience discrimination and feel that they do not belong in Canadian society.

This indicates that the ideal of multiculturalism is still that — an ideal. Clearly, one of the challenges that we face as a country is to ensure that minorities feel like they belong in Canada and that they become an active part of Canadian society.

Canada has always been culturally diverse. Prior to the 1960s, visible minorities of non-European ancestry made up less than 2 per cent of Canada's population. Now, the majority of immigrants are visible minorities. In 2001, visible minorities made up 13.4 per cent of the population. By 2017, Stats Canada has projected that racial minorities will comprise 20 per cent of the population.

The increase in visible minorities is most apparent in Canada's major cities. In 1971, racial minorities represented only about 3 per cent of the total population of Toronto. By 2002, visible minorities had grown to 36.8 per cent of the Greater Toronto Area's 4.6 million people. Stats Canada projects that by 2017, visible minorities will be in the majority both in Vancouver and Toronto.

The challenge is not only to ensure that visible minorities experience legal equality but also, on a more practical, everyday level, the challenge is to ensure that Canadians embrace other Canadians of different cultural backgrounds and recognize them as an integral part of the country.

Minorities must be equal in the hearts and minds of all Canadians and our conduct and policies must reflect this.

We simply cannot discount feelings of racial discrimination or regard them as a minor concern.

One of the ways to help ensure minorities feel that they belong is to ensure that cultural diversity is respected and that individuals feel comfortable taking pride in their culture, and indeed in sharing their unique experiences and perspectives.

The challenge is: How do we make this happen?

In essence, we are shaped by the relationships and interactions that we have with others in society. Because our identity is shaped by recognition or even non-recognition, a person or group can suffer real harm if their cultural identity is not recognized by society. Put another way, are we having riots or about to have riots in Canada, albeit of a less violent kind than those in France?

I'm not an alarmist but there are many troubling signs. Poverty in so many manifestations, unemployment, anti-Semitism, racism, despair are huge issues to tackle but we must address these with our best minds and efforts.

While Canada's diversity represents a challenge, it represents an even greater promise for the future.

If we work to strengthen each and every one of Canada's diverse sectors, then we will strengthen Canada as a whole, and we will reap the benefits.

How do we achieve the promise of multiculturalism? How do we make a multicultural society work in practice and how do we address the challenges of diversity?

I don't have the answers or indeed all the right questions to ask. But all of us should ask ourselves what we are doing to improve our efforts in this regard.

The promise of the future is in part embodied in the Charter. It defines the ideal of Canada as a pluralist and inclusive country that maintains its unity through the protection and recognition of multiculturalism and basic human rights.

However, the promise of multiculturalism must go beyond the Charter to a basic human level. Canadians must not only tolerate diversity, they must personally embrace and promote it.

Particular focus should be placed on the education of Canada's youth — to ensure not only that the value of diversity is taught in schools but also that children experience cultural diversity first hand.

We have done a lot that is right in Canada and have much of which to be proud.

However, we cannot take our privileged position for granted.

Grateful as we are for the growth and prosperity that we have in our country, we know that we still face many challenges.

If Canada can get it right, however, its ideal of pluralism can become a model for the rest of the world. Let us all do what we can to attain that goal.

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