

Robert Chr. Thomsen

## INTRODUCTION TO CANADIAN MULTICULTURALISM

*Robert Chr. Thomsen is an associate professor and former director of the Canadian Studies Centre at the University of Aarhus. He continues to teach and publish in Canadian Studies as director of CIRCLA, the Arctic Studies Centre at Aalborg University.*

### WHILE READING

✦ Take notes for the following questions:

- Why was Canada multicultural from its birth?
- What measures were taken to accommodate the Francophone population in 1969?
- What was the background for introducing a multicultural policy in 1971?
- What do Canadian policies of multiculturalism include?
- What are the main differences between a cultural mosaic and a melting pot society (with a policy of assimilation)?
- What are some of the main points of criticism of multiculturalism?

### Introduction To Multiculturalism

We often refer to Canada as one of the best-functioning 'multicultural' countries in the world. This is partly based on the fact that Canada is a modern, rich and well-functioning society, which consists of a number of different ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds. Another reason is the fact that it was the first country to introduce policies and laws that stated that such a multi-cultural society is, in fact, a wonderful and beneficial thing that all Canadians should celebrate and seek to maintain.

From its very birth, Canada was multi-cultural: the original indigenous cultures of the Indian and Inuit populations occupied all the land that would become Canada, and as first the French Empire and later the British Empire established settlements and whole colonies, additional cultural groups joined the original ones. Because of this, it is still common in Canada to speak of the 'Three Founding Nations': the Indigenous population, those of French descent and those of British descent. By the time the Canadian Dominion (self-governing British colony) was declared in 1867, immigration had increased the number of Canadians by hundreds of thousands and although most immigrants still came from the

**state** (vb) – sige

**beneficial** (adj) –  
fordelagtig

**maintain** (vb) –  
vedligeholde

**indigenous** (adj) –  
oprindelig

**occupy** (vb) – være bosat i

**descent** (subst) –  
afstamning

**dominion** (subst) –  
ligeberettiget medlem af  
det britiske stats-samfund

**increase** (vb) – forøge

n<sup>o</sup> **habit** (vb) – bebo  
e<sup>o</sup> **commodate** (vb) –  
imødekomme  
i<sup>o</sup> **lingual** (adj) – tosproget  
n<sup>o</sup> **prosper** (vb) – have  
fremgang  
o<sup>o</sup> **ost** (vb) – løfte  
a<sup>o</sup> **apidly** (adv) – hurtigt  
i<sup>o</sup> **verse** (adj) – mangfoldig  
e<sup>o</sup> **gardless** (adv) – uanset  
o<sup>o</sup> **igin** (subst) – oprindelse  
e<sup>o</sup> **clare** (vb) – erklære  
e<sup>o</sup> **ritage** (subst) –  
kulturarv  
n<sup>o</sup> **courage** (vb) – opfordre  
u<sup>o</sup> **stom** (subst) – skik  
s<sup>o</sup> **similate** (vb) – integrere  
sig  
i<sup>o</sup> **stinction** (subst) –  
skelnen  
e<sup>o</sup> **lting pot** (subst) –  
smeltedigel  
l<sup>o</sup> **egedly** (adv) – angiveligt

British Isles, people from all parts of Europe (including Denmark) had settled here also.

Canada was created as a federal state of provinces, and the largest group of Francophones (French speakers) continues to inhabit one of them: Québec. In all the other provinces the Anglophones (English speakers) formed – and still form – the majority. The co-existence of these two large language groups has sometimes proved difficult. The Francophones, who number about 5-6 million people, have often been concerned about the survival of their culture and language in a ‘sea’ of English-speaking North Americans, so to accommodate the Francophones, Canada was made a ‘bilingual’ state with two official languages, English and French, in 1969.

Sooner than other western countries Canada accepted that as its population is generally becoming older (Canadians, like Danes, live longer and have fewer children), and if it is to continue to prosper and be one of the world’s wealthiest societies, it is necessary to continue to boost the population by immigration. In spite of a low birth rate, Canada’s population has grown from 12 million in 1945 to 35 million today, and Canada continues to have the world’s highest immigration rate per inhabitant: around 300,000 people become Canadians every year.

Since the 1960s, when Canadian governments became less critical of ‘non-white’ immigration, the Asian, South American and African pieces of the population pie have increased rapidly, making Canada one of the most ethnically diverse societies in the world. It was on this background that the Canadian government in 1971 decided to introduce the world’s first ‘Multiculturalism’ policy, which argued that all Canadians, regardless of their racial or ethnic origins should be considered equal and allowed to celebrate their own culture without being in any way excluded from Canada’s social, economic or political life. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act from 1988 goes further and declares: “Multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity” (p. 3, b). If we believe the words of this act, one could almost say that multiculturalism has become the Canadian way of life.

Policies to encourage multiculturalism include economic support of cultural events and organisations and acts that declare racism and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or customs illegal. A few years ago, even the iconic Mountie police force was instructed that Sikhs must be allowed to replace the famous Stetson hat of the uniform with a turban. Because of such policies it has become common to speak of Canada as a ‘cultural mosaic’ – a place where people from different ethnic groups could settle and prosper without giving up their own cultural identity and traditions. In other words, they would not be required to ‘assimilate’ to a common, national culture. Canadians generally like to make a distinction between their ‘mosaic’ and the American ‘melting pot’ into which all new immigrant cultures allegedly go.

From the account above it may seem right to conclude that multiculturalism is widely accepted in Canada, and a great success; that it manages to allow all cultures in society to maintain their own distinctness, while providing them with equal opportunities to prosper. This is not entirely the truth, however, and there  
 5 are critical voices in Canadian society who either reject the idea completely, or at least would like to give multiculturalism a different shape.

On occasion, Francophones and Indigenous people have suggested that as founding nations they ought to have different, more extensive rights than cultural groups who have 'just got off the boat', and Canadians concerned about the  
 10 national identity of the country argue that if all cultures are considered equally valuable, then Canada becomes just a micro-world without any room for distinctly Canadian values and principles (other than multiculturalism). A common cultural identity is an essential social glue, it is argued, so if a common Canadian culture ceases to exist, so will Canada.

Other critical voices come from what might be considered an unlikely  
 15 environment: the minority ethnic groups themselves. One criticism suggests that multiculturalism in Canada is really only a fancy policy, and that most Canadians don't actually agree with it. Consequently, they continue to employ, vote for, and socialise with people who look and speak like themselves. Consequently, Toronto  
 20 has the world's best educated taxi drivers – because this is the only occupation available to highly educated foreigners, like e.g. Pakistani engineers. Others believe that the entire point about immigrating is renewal: an opportunity to start over and become part of a new society. Multiculturalism with its emphasis on cultural protection, the criticism goes, prevents that process by insisting on the  
 25 preservation of that which is exotic, and thus 'ghettoises' newcomers.

Such criticism points to cracks in what would otherwise be an admirable approach to the accommodation of ethnic and cultural difference. But then again, very few such progressive ideologies and policies come into this world flawless. Compared to other societies in the world which have only recently (or never)  
 30 introduced multiculturalism policies, Canada is well ahead. As Canadians continue to debate the best ways to create unity in diversity – in the process exposing and repairing cracks – Canada remains a wonderful laboratory of multiculturalism, which we and others around the world can study and be inspired by.

ac'count (subst) –  
 redegørelse  
 ex'tensive (adj) –  
 omfattende  
 cease (vb) – høre op  
 'fancy (adj) – flot  
 em'ploy (vb) – ansætte  
 occu'pation (subst) –  
 erhverv  
 preser'vation (subst) –  
 bevarelse  
 'newcomer (subst) –  
 nytilkommen  
 'admirable (adj) –  
 beundringsværdig  
 'flawless (adj) – fejlfri  
 'recently (adv) – fornylig  
 ex'pose (vb) – afdække

## WORKING WITH TEXT IN CLASS

### INDIVIDUAL WORK

Later, you will sum up the introduction to multiculturalism by creating 60-second lectures. But first you will need some inspiration as to how these are prepared.

- ✦ Go to [www.sas.upenn.edu/60second](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/60second) and watch three 60-second lectures from University of Pennsylvania. Watch, for example, “What Makes a Poem a Poem” by Professor Charles Bernstein. Scroll to the bottom of the page, and choose “search by topic” to see a full list of the lectures.

### PAIR WORK

- ✦ Get together with a neighbour, and take turns sharing your answers from while reading.
- ✦ Comment, correct, and/or add to your partner’s answers.
- ✦ Write down points your partner presents, that you didn’t already have.

### PAIR WORK OR INDIVIDUAL WORK

Decide whether you want to continue working in pairs, or if you want to work individually.

- ✦ Create a 60-second lecture on an introduction to multiculturalism. Your lecture should include (some of) the answers from while reading, including the new points your partner may have added.
- ✦ The form of your lecture is up to you, as long as it is exactly 60 seconds. You are allowed to create it as a film, a podcast or an oral lecture – whichever you prefer.

### CLASS PRESENTATIONS

- ✦ Present your 60-second lectures to your classmates.
- ✦ Sum up in class if there are any parts of the introduction to multiculturalism about which you are uncertain, or about which you disagree with your classmates.