

## Canadian Language and Cultural Policies - a model of multiculturalism for Northern Ireland?

October 2001

### **Introduction**

This paper is the result of a short period of research carried out in September 2001 as part of an international exchange programme organised by the INCORE<sup>1</sup> unit of the University of Ulster. It's purpose was to consider models of good practice and identify those policies and practices that might prove valuable to the cultural challenges faced in contemporary Northern Ireland. My study visit to Toronto and Ottawa included meetings with many public servants, campaigners and academics, and I am particularly grateful for the assistance provided by Heritage Canada in making such a rich dialogue possible.

Clearly, the Canadian context is quite different to our own, yet the fundamental issues of national, regional or ethnic identity, competitive linguistic and human rights, disputed historical narratives and demographic change are highly pertinent to both situations. This paper seeks to outline the historical development of bilingual and multicultural policies in Canada in order to show, however pragmatically they have arisen, they contribute towards coherent ideas of ethnicity and nationalism. I will then discuss the potential for a more or less literal application of this kind of multiculturalism to the Northern Irish context, and argue that it is most likely to be successful at the pan-European level of diversity management.

### **The politics of bilingualism**

Modern Canadian bilingualism is the result of a conscious effort to embrace diverse cultural interests in a single political entity. The communities involved at

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<sup>1</sup> INCORE stands for the Institute for the study of Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity, based in Derry Northern Ireland

the outset of this endeavour belonged to different political, linguistic and religious global spheres associated with competing colonial global interests. After the military defeat of the French at the battle of Quebec in 1812, it became necessary to combine these diverse interests, not least in response to the potential threat of annexation by the United States. The immense provinces that constitute Canada have only been politically linked together as a state during the last century, largely for pragmatic reasons, and as the relationship between the nation's cultural peripheries and centre continue to change it is not unreasonable to look at Canada as 'a work in progress'. Because there was a political need to forge a coalition of both French and English speaking settlers, these were accorded a privileged status of 'Founding Peoples', and it was the cultural rights of those communities alone that were enshrined in the constitution of 1867. The aboriginal communities of the continent were much later included as nation builders under the category of 'First Peoples'. As I will discuss later, Canadian aboriginal rights have tended to be linked to geographical and racial definitions of community more than 'culture' per se. In any case, English and French were established quite early on as the official languages of the state, and subsequent waves of migrants were not given the same cultural status, essentially on the basis that they were numerically much smaller communities and had arrived *after* the constitution was written. This has set a precedent for the recognition of 'collective rights' in Canada, which is quite a different basis for citizenship than, for example, the focus on the rights of the individual, that are the focus of both the United States constitution and international human rights legislation.

Up until relatively recently, Anglo-French bi-lingualism also mapped onto other aspects of culture. The original French speaking community, for example, were predominantly Catholic whilst Anglophones were most likely to be Protestant. Federal government support for education tended also to follow this dual route. Modern state schools are non-denominational, but the government is nevertheless constitutionally bound to support Catholic schooling even though it does not subsidise education within other religious denominations. This

inconsistency has been a matter of public debate for some time. More recent migrations, however, have brought both Catholics from non-Francophone origins *and* non-Catholic French speakers into the system. These trends have increased demand for secularised French language education whilst blurring this particular link between ethnicity and service provision.

Although the ethnic and religious mix of French and English speakers has become more complex, their relative geographic location has remained fairly static. I suspect that this is partly due to the degree of cultural autonomy enjoyed by provincial governments. In most of Quebec, French is officially the first language, although most would be able to communicate in English too. Following the adoption of a series of controversial language laws in Quebec (notably 1977's Bill 101) French was very assertively promoted in the province, to the extent that many solely English speakers migrated to other parts of Canada. Although English was taught in French-language schools, secondary education *in the medium of English* was provided only where this was the first language of the child's family. This was no longer a matter of free choice but followed instead the impetus of collective values

In Ontario, as elsewhere in Canada, French is only the 'mother tongue' in clusters of communities spread out amongst an Anglophone majority. English speakers outside Quebec are much less likely to have good French, and although it has long been a serious aspiration of the Canadian government true bi-lingualism amongst the population as a whole is relatively uncommon. Whilst 16.3% of Quebecois are considered bi-lingual, the figure is a mere 6.4% in overwhelmingly Anglophone British Columbia.

This is not to detract from sincere efforts, both practical and symbolic, that the federal government have made to encourage this ideal. Not only are both French and English compulsory subjects throughout the education system, but significant incentives also exist for adults to master a second language,

particularly through immersion learning programmes. Certain grades of public service jobs, for example, require specific levels of competency in both English and French. Such regulatory policies and incentives certainly do encourage a culture of bilingualism, though the extent of this 'in practice' inevitably varies regionally and from one agency to another.

Under closer examination, the widespread provision of immersion courses does not seem to be taken up at all evenly. Employment requirements aside, adult training in English appeals more to recent Francophone migrants to Quebec rather than the 'founding peoples' communities, just as the uptake of French immersion courses is rather small elsewhere. Outside Quebec, and local Francophone strongholds, speaking French is a prerequisite for 'getting on' in life, so is most encouraged amongst middle-class families with an eye to their children's future employment, whether or not the language is ever spoken in everyday discourse. In short, those who don't have a good incentive to work towards bi-lingualism usually aren't motivated simply out of patriotism.

Despite the Federal Government's generous and even-handed provision of resources aimed at encouraging bilingualism, many Francophone *and* Anglophone Canadians still nurse the myth that their own linguistic community is relatively deprived outside the area of their regional political control. Whilst such views are probably the result of decades of mistrust and rivalry rather than of experiences, this resentment is mobilised in discourses intent on strengthening the political periphery at the expense of the centre. Thus considerable tension exists between regional and federal levels of government, and ethnolinguistic issues contribute to the discourses that maintain it.

### **Broadcasting**

As an inclusive gesture of bi-lingual identity, the national broadcast media operates a parallel system of radio and television services in both official languages. It is surely satisfying for Francophones to know that it is possible to

receive broadcast networks in their own tongue in the Rockies and great plains as well as the shores of the St Lawrence river, although the French speaking population in those areas can be very small. In fact, when the output of the two networks is compared, one finds that they really are largely autonomous. Just like the content of daily French and English newspapers (the circulation of which actually *does* reflect local demand) the personalities and cultural interests and political viewpoints do not overlap a great deal at all. Rather than these media reflecting a single bi-lingual culture, they actually show two fairly distinct popular, political and social cultures that co-exist in the same geographical space.

Perhaps this linguistic example provides a useful illustration of how Canadian cultural diversity is managed generally. Because of the size of the country, encompassing several time zones as well as climatic regions, it is most practical to manage affairs on a local or provincial basis, leaving central government largely responsible for international relations, arbitration of disputes and areas of broad economic and social policy. Larger cities also exercise considerable legislative autonomy, whilst aboriginal reservations and the new province of Nunavut (where Inuit peoples are in the majority) also enjoy laws and rights that are unique to their territory. Thus it is possible for local cultural as well as linguistic needs to be met at metropolitan or provincial levels so long as this does not contravene broad based constitutional or other Federal legislation. Human rights laws serve as a safety net for those who believe their rights are not being met domestically, and a government backed agency itself supports challenges made on this basis.

This is a flexible system for maintaining a diverse coalition of regional and ethnic interests, though it could be argued that it is derived from legal distinctions made between races rather than cultures. To take one example, Federal legislation exists to encourage full ethnic participation in public employment by positively welcoming citizens who are 'visible minorities' – those considered to bear the brunt of the most racial discrimination. However, these 'visible minorities' are

identified by racial characteristics and even specify particular racial groups. Blacks and Arabs, are listed as 'visible minorities' whilst others are not. Thus, if a white person went to live in Nunavut, where he or she would be a racial and cultural minority he would not be afforded 'visible minority' status because this is a fixed, legal category, not a relational one. In fact, he would neither be entitled to the traditional rights enjoyed by Inuit themselves, as they also constitute a legally defined racial category.

These comments are not intended in any way to criticise the way that Canada manages its cultural diversity, as its policies have clearly been very successful in this context. This approach is, however, possibly the inevitable consequence of forging cultural policies on the basis of collective rather than individual rights. Regional and racial communities on the whole police 'themselves' for the greater good of participation in a stable, and wealthy democratic state.

The situation becomes more complex, though, when we look at the superheated melting pot of cities like Toronto, where the constant influx of new migrants from different parts of the world jostle for accommodation, employment and recognition of *their* own rights. For many reasons some communities thrive whilst others do not fare so well, and this is an ongoing problem for those promoting a cohesive sense of national identity. Nevertheless, Toronto boasts a remarkably high proportion of inter-racial marriages, which probably says much about Canada's success in selling its multicultural ideal, at least to second generation minorities.

The precise characteristics of Canadian national identity may be hard to identify, but on the other hand they do not overtly threaten or oppress ethnic identification. It has so far been the norm to manage dispersed and identifiable communities with specific cultural 'needs', but this 'mixing' in cities may make it very much harder to use racial or ethnic difference as a basis for defining *collective* rights. The way Canada has adapted to this development has been to oblige individuals

to 'self-identify' their ethnicity – meaning that there is a limit to how many hyphens it is legally possible to append to an ethnic identity. This move towards the individual is perhaps recognition of the limitations of the 'collective' model.

So, how can a place like Northern Ireland benefit from the ongoing Canadian experience? There are some lessons to be learned, even if they are cautionary. Given the difference in physical scale between the two contexts there is obviously a limit to the linguistic or other cultural rights that could be afforded to geographically defined communities here. For economic or other logistical reasons it would probably not be feasible to have different language, educational or cultural rights depending upon one's residence in Antrim or Fermanagh. The result would be a multiple *gaeltacht*<sup>2</sup> scenario with small, designated linguistic zones everywhere outside major towns. Although it is possible in Northern Ireland, should the majority of residents wish it, to have street signs written in languages other than English, it is not within the gift of district councils to make it compulsory to use them in the work place or on all public signage. Extreme though this example may sound, this degree of compulsion was a result of Quebec's language laws in the 1970's. Whilst a vigorous movement exists in Northern Ireland promoting education in the medium of Irish, campaigners presently seek this as an option, not a compulsion.

In Northern Ireland it might also be unwise to distinguish between 'ethnicities' on the basis of racial characteristics. If fully and properly implemented the legislation that now exists to protect individuals from discrimination in the workplace and hate crimes on any basis should be sufficient to guarantee equality. Debates on the definition of the *Cruthin* or the *Gael*<sup>3</sup> are tortuous enough without attaching

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<sup>2</sup> The 'gaeltacht' is the name given by the Irish Government to specified regions where the Irish language predominates as the mother tongue. Legislation defines and protects these areas as special linguistic pockets, and many learners of Irish spend time in the gaeltacht to benefit from living amongst native speakers.

<sup>3</sup> The Cruthin and Gael are argued to be the 'founding peoples' of those identifying with Scottish or Irish ancestry respectively. Their existence as distinct races in the distant past has proved to be as hard to prove as it has been to define 'the Celt'. Lack of clear evidence has not, however, deterred the faithful from using these notions to justify contemporary segregation.

inalienable rights to either. Whilst Northern Ireland does already boast an ethnically segregated education system, this has not, in the end, reassured the two main communities here that their culture has been equally protected and valued by the state. In Canada, a steady influx of new ethnic groups have been more or less content to serve as an underclass whilst they establish themselves and secure a better future for their children. The troubles, and relative poverty, have assured that Northern Irish communities have remained ethnically and religiously very static compared to neighbouring European countries.

In fact, to make a more realistic comparison between Canada and Northern Ireland one really has to look at the scale of Europe, where an even greater linguistic diversity is managed within a common political and cultural umbrella. The EU policy of promoting regional cultural autonomy, and particularly of language, encourages local identification.<sup>4</sup> Such development is frequently at the expense of the member nation state, which is then less able to centralise cultural policies. The task of constructing a coherent sense of European identity involves much the same 'balancing' of various rights, duties and relationships on macro and micro levels of identification that we observe in Canadian multiculturalism. This is a topic for a different debate altogether except, I would argue, that it offers a more appropriate level of comparison than with the Northern Irish context.

To conclude, Canada appears to enjoy an enviable balance between local autonomy and regional ethnicities. Whether or not specific policies and practices could be applied here, Canadians have achieved a degree of consensus on national identity that has so far been very weak in Northern Ireland. Whilst I believe it would be adding fuel to the fire to 'ringfence' cultural rights for our already deeply divided committees, it may still be possible to actively promote

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<sup>4</sup> The European Bureau of Lesser-Used Languages exists to help identify and promote those linguistic variations that constitute a regional 'language' rather than a 'dialect'. Official recognition by the bureau and member states bring both rights and (very often) revenue to those promoting their local form of speech.

some 'umbrella' level of Northern Irish identity that neither favours nor threatens local diversity. Such a project admittedly requires considerable clarity of vision and commitment at the highest levels, perhaps particularly within local institutions. But surely that is exactly what good civic and political leadership ought to be about.

### **Bibliography**

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Inevitably such recognition has political implications, as regional languages (and associated identities) have typically been suppressed over the last two centuries of European nation building.