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On Extremism and Multiculturalism in Canada

Although ethno-cultural differences have always been part of Canadian history, multiculturalism did not surface as a public issue until after World War II, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, there was a revival of ethnic identification in North America. Leaders of several immigrant and well established ethnic groups in Canada were strong advocates of multiculturalism. This advocacy gathered momentum following the establishment of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (B & B Commission) in 1963, which inquired into the contribution made by non-British and non-French Canadians “to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution.”

In these heady days, the Parliament of Canada adopted a policy of multiculturalism in 1971. In the decade that followed, the multicultural reality in Canada was recognized in Section 27 of the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and in 1988 the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was passed. As a result, until now, many western countries admire and continue to be interested in Canada’s multiculturalism policy.

From its inception, the policy of multiculturalism has had its staunch supporters and ardent critics. On the one hand, supporters viewed this policy not merely as a symbolic gesture to appease ethnic groups, but rather as a prelude to a more equitable distribution of social, economic and political resources. On the other hand, critics of this policy argued that it was divisive because it ghettoized ethnic groups and stood in the way of their full integration into the host society. They further argued that racism is still prevalent in Canada, that labour market inequities remain, and that First Nations are still in search of a fair deal, implying that multiculturalism is of no value.

The newest and perhaps strongest criticism of multiculturalism comes from the sitting Liberal Member of Parliament, Hon. Ujjal Dosanjh, who was brutally beaten in Vancouver in 1985 after speaking against Sikh violence and extremism. Writing in the *Globe and Mail* (April 21, 2010), Jane Armstrong reported that Mr. Dosanjh said ‘Canadian multiculturalism has allowed extremism to take root in Sikh and other ethnic communities.’ While Mr. Dosanjh has grounds for speaking out against illegal and violent activities, and for condemning physical violence directed at himself or other Canadians, there is little evidence that multiculturalism per se has given extremists the space for or the right to engage in unlawful behaviour. Certainly this is not the multiculturalism that the Parliament of Canada adopted some forty years ago; or the multiculturalism that

was entrenched either in the Charter or in the Multiculturalism Act. Indeed, the vision and legislation governing multiculturalism is firmly set within the boundaries of Canadian law.

Multiculturalism as a means to ensure equity in Canada remains a work in progress, and deserves better funding. Mr. Dosanjh's recent comments suggest there may also be a need for ongoing explication of what it means to be a multicultural nation.