

Issues & Ideas

Hardly a melting pot

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American Myths, a five-part series aimed at addressing Canadian misapprehensions about our southern neighbour, is a joint project of the National Post, the **Dominion Institute** and the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. In this third instalment, Patrick Luciani disputes the notion that America demands assimilation even as Canada provides immigrants with a 'genteel, multicultural nirvana.'

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Once upon a time, I was an immigrant. But I've never referred to myself as one.. Having come here as an infant, I've long identified more with my adopted country than the one I left -- which is why the idea of hyphenated Canadians has always seemed bizarre to me, and why I've always been puzzled by our country's negative attitudes and misperceptions about the American "melting pot."

As with most immigrants, my parents came for simple reasons: to find work and make a better life for their children. But my parents were coming to North America, not necessarily to Canada. For many immigrants back then, Canada was America with little to distinguish the two.

My parents didn't choose Canada for its "mosaic" over the American "melting pot"; in fact, we would have settled in San Francisco rather than Southern Ontario if not for the death of a distant relative living there. But once here, my mother and father adapted to their new country and its customs as quickly as they could, while maintaining their Italian traditions without any prompting from the state. Our experience wasn't unique: I suspect most immigrants couldn't care less about intellectual debates over multiculturalism so long as they're given a chance to get on with their lives in a safe and tolerant society.

All this is a long way of saying that we exaggerate the impact of public policy in determining the behaviour of immigrants here or in the United States. The notion that America forces its immigrants to give up their language, customs and traditions is as naive as believing that Canada effectively promotes complete ethnic harmony and tolerance.

And from these myths spring others.

Another myth, for instance, is that American immigrant kids who put their hands over their hearts and recite the pledge of allegiance grow up to be one-dimensional citizens with no connection to their pasts.

Israel Zangwell, who coined the term "melting pot" in a play of the same name in 1908, never assumed that immigrants would lose their cultural identities. Quite the contrary: Not only did he think immigrants would be affected by their new country, but vice-versa as well. In becoming Americans, immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Poland, Italy, Greece, Scotland and Asia influenced each other's customs, languages and behaviour. In many cases, these customs were transformed to the point where they were unrecognizable in their original countries.

Many of Zangwell's observations were confirmed in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan classic 1963 book on the behaviour of immigrants, *Beyond the Melting Pot*. They argued that contrary to the early theories of assimilation, Jewish, Irish and Italian residents of New York City never entirely shed their sense of ethnic identity -- and blacks and Puerto Ricans did so even less. In his 1997 book, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*, Glazer reconfirmed his earlier observations -- even as he lamented the failure of American society to fully integrate blacks who continue to remain far outside the cultural and social mainstream.

Last year, Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington argued in *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* that the United States is now undergoing a radical shift in immigration. In the past, no single foreign-born ethnic group dominated: In 1960, for instance, 1.26 million immigrants were born in Italy, followed by about one million from Germany and Canada, 830,000 from the U.K. and 750,000 from Poland. By 2000, things were very different. In that year, 7.8 million new Americans (both legal and illegal) had been born in Mexico alone -- followed (distantly) by 1.4 million from China, 1.2 from the Philippines and a further million each from both India and Cuba.

This skewed level of immigration is without precedent in U.S. history. And if anyone thinks that all these Hispanics are assimilating according to some cookie-cutter melting-pot formula, they aren't paying attention. In 1990, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 95% spoke Spanish at home and 43% were "linguistically isolated." And there's a strong movement, particularly in California, to promote the use of two languages to the point of creating a bilingual society. If anything, American immigrants are assimilating too slowly (or not at all) -- not too quickly.

Another related myth is the one about our own country: that children who are actively encouraged to maintain strong ties to the countries their families left behind, and who grow up learning to sing O Canada in both official languages, become well-rounded citizens of the world.

If the United States isn't the melting pot most of us believe, the flip-side is the myth that Canadians live in an inclusive, genteel, multicultural Nirvana. The ideal of cultural pluralism is the essence of Canadian identity: Some even cheer the hyphenated Canadian as "a bridge and not a minus sign." But in the end, such gestures signify reluctance among immigrants, a lack of commitment, and a sense of waiting to see how things turn out -- hardly the best way to build a nation.

Rather than celebrating official multiculturalism, we should be trying to explain why immigrants to Canadians no longer participate politically -- other than being used by parties to pack local nomination meetings. Immigrants once took their civic duties seriously and quickly developed strong attachments to the institution of the monarchy and the parliamentary system: I still have strong memories of my father and mother dressing up before going to the polls, and I doubt they ever missed a municipal, provincial or federal election. But all that has changed.

Why are immigrants participating less? Is it apathy? Or is it that today, about 75% of them come from non-democratic countries with little tradition of civic participation?

Whatever the reason, we have to lay the blame partially at the feet of a government policy that places cultural pluralism above democratic traditions. The alternative argument, that recent immigrants don't vote because of discrimination or alienation from a system they don't understand, simply doesn't wash.

When ethnic groups do participate politically, too often they vote in blocs and on narrow issues about how Canadian foreign policy affects their homeland -- a pattern consistent with broader social behaviours. When war broke out in the Balkans, tensions arose between Canadian Serbs and Croats -- both groups identifying so strongly with their homelands that some actually went back to fight for their counties. We can expect greater divided loyalties as we diversify our immigrant base over the years. We must get past the notion that longstanding hostilities are abandoned the moment immigrants set foot in our country, an illusion shattered 20 years ago when Canadian Sikh terrorists brought down Air India Flight 182 and killed 329 passengers -- a tragedy Canadians have never come to terms with.

If ethnic groups are encouraged to reject assimilation, we should not be surprised if they also bring along customs that conflict with our own. Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty was on the verge of

supporting Sharia law before it recently created a political firestorm in his party. But Sharia law was a natural outcome of a policy that tolerated cultural intolerance. Some mosaic.

Abolish Ottawa's Ministry of State for Multiculturalism, and no one would grieve except a few civil servants, academics and assorted multicultural rent seekers. Even Pierre Trudeau -- applauded for introducing the Multicultural Act in 1971, but never wildly enthusiastic about it -- would have been appalled by how it wound up segregating us. Wouldn't it be nice if we occasionally emphasized our own Canadian culture of tolerance, freedom, opportunity and the rule of law -- virtues missing from places most immigrants come from?

Lazy assumptions about an American melting pot -- without any attempt to understand the complexity of American society -- contribute to a delusional attitude toward our own degree of success with multiculturalism. To the extent that Canada's immigrants are integrating and getting on with their lives, it's not because of multicultural social policy -- it's in spite of it.

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Black & White Photo: Mario Tama, Getty Images / New Yorkers, in all their hues, share a subway car.