Unity and Diversity in Canada:
A Preliminary Assessment

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Balancing unity and diversity has preoccupied Canadians throughout their history and continues to do so today. Yet by international standards, Canada is considered a success. As one of the world's oldest and most stable federations, Canada has managed to deal with several dimensions of diversity simultaneously. It is a multinational country, responding to the province of Quebec's sense of nationhood and to Aboriginal people's conception of themselves as First Nations. It is a highly regional country – a "federal society" – with important provincial identities, and with large regional differences in terms of demography, population, economy and wealth. It is a country of immigrants, increasingly characterized by a diverse, multicultural population.

    Several elements of the Canadian model stand out. First, Canadians have debated their differences – even the possibility that one member state, Quebec, might secede from the country – in ways that are peaceful, civil, and respectful of democratic values. Second, in responding to diversity, Canada has been what we might call an ongoing "negotiated" country, rather than a country of revolution or single majority domination. Third, both Canadian law and historical political practice have been based on

the premise that unity is best achieved through the recognition and accommodation of difference. The fundamental values underpinning the Canadian model were well-stated by the Supreme Court of Canada in a landmark 1998 decision. The Court held that democracy, federalism, constitutionalism and the rule of law and respect for minority rights were, and must remain, the guiding principles of the Canadian federation. Many worry however that too much emphasis on diversity and not enough on shared Canadian values raises the question of social cohesion and solidarity; where is the "glue" that binds individuals and communities together?

Canada and Quebec, French and English
The only cleavage that could end the Canadian experiment is a rift between English and French-speaking Canadians, expressed as the division between Quebec and the "Rest of Canada." French-speaking Canadians make up about one quarter of the Canadian population. About 80 percent of those French-speaking Canadians live in Quebec where they constitute more than 85 percent of the population. Thus, while there are important linguistic minorities both within and outside Quebec, the linguistic division is primarily expressed in territorial terms.

Aboriginal Canadians
Canada, like the United States and Australia, was a classic settler society in which Europeans pushed the indigenous peoples to the margins. The legacies of this history remain today. Aboriginal peoples – Indians, Métis, and Inuit – make up only about three percent of the population but make a strong claim for long-delayed justice. This is based on the historic wrongs of their dispossession, and on historic social outcomes characterized by high rates of unemployment, poverty, disease, and social distress.

In the modern period, Aboriginal political mobilization began in the 1960s in reaction against proposed new Canadian policy to assimilate them fully into mainstream life. Aboriginal peoples reacted to maintain their societies and cultures, to regain control over land and resources, and to acquire a measure of self government. They defined themselves as First Nations, with an inherent right to self-government and with a desire to interact with other Canadians on a nation-to-nation basis. A Canadian Royal Commission strongly endorsed these views in the mid 1990s. A series of decisions by Canadian courts have supported Aboriginal claims and enhanced their bargaining power. The revisions to the Canadian Constitution of 1982 recognized Aboriginal status and provided for constitutional protection of past and future treaties. However, these changes have little effect on the majority of Aboriginal peoples, who now live in urban areas. Many Canadians view relations with Aboriginal peoples as the darkest stain on Canada's historical record of accommodation of diversity.

Region

Federalism, conferring considerable policy and fiscal autonomy to the provinces, is the primary institutional mechanism for managing regional differences. Intergovernmental relations conducted through the mechanisms of executive federalism have generally been a successful means of negotiating the accommodation of differences. But this process has become competitive and adversarial in recent years, with each order of government focused on protecting its own turf and bickering over financial arrangements. The underlying concern is that the Canadian form of federalism exacerbates rather than ameliorates matters at the regional level.

Multiculturalism

From its beginning, Canada has been a country of immigrants. For most of its history, Canadian policy favored immigration from Europe and was explicitly racist. In the 1970s, Canada, like other countries, removed most of the discriminatory elements from its policies and significantly increased the number of immigrants it welcomed. Today, Canada has one of the most open immigration policies in the world to the degree that it has embraced multiculturalism as a fundamental and defining characteristic of the country. This is reflected in the Constitution Act, 1982, which includes a clause requiring that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms be interpreted in light of the multicultural character of Canada, and in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 that defines multiculturalism as fundamental to Canadian identity. With respect to social integration, these policies have been very successful.

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These are major successes, but complacency is to be avoided. Some immigrant groups have done much better professionally and economically than others. Cities that have received the majority of immigrants continue to have difficulties in integrating new Canadians, and providing services in multiple languages. Cities need to play a larger role in immigration policy and need more support to enact their role in integration. Canadians are debating how to reflect the universal values and individual rights embodied in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms with the collective rights of Aboriginal peoples and Quebecers. There is some evidence that the celebrated Canadian commitment to multiculturalism may be fraying at least at the edges in recent debates, but there is little evidence of a fundamental shift away from a commitment to multiculturalism, or, as Quebec calls it, *interculturalism.*

Conclusion and Lessons

Canada's is a good news story, despite its flaws. Multiple diversities can be accommodated and managed peacefully and democratically. Canadians' ability to manage their differences has depended on a number of benign conditions that do not necessarily prevail elsewhere, especially in developing countries, namely: a democratic culture; respect for the rule of law; a tradition of negotiation and compromise, affluence and a prosperous economy; extensive social infrastructure and high levels of education and peaceful relations with the neighboring U.S. Nevertheless, there are other elements in the Canadian experience that others might consider. These include the provisions of Canadian multiculturalism and Quebec's *interculturalism;* Canada's tradition as a welfare state; its ability to embrace asymmetrical federalism; and to have elaborated, with the help of the Supreme Court, clear principles that would prevail in the event of either a coming together or a dissolution of the country.