CANADIAN MULTICULTURALISM VS. GERMAN "MULTIKULTI"

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Vahan Kololian,Chairman-The Mosaic Institute, The Toronto Star, 7 November 2010

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This is true of countries in Latin America, the United States and certainly Canada. One does not have to look far to see successful business and political leaders who are either first- or second-generation immigrants, whether they be Mexico's Carlos Slim, the son of Lebanese-born immigrants and the wealthiest man in the world, or U.S. President Barack Obama, son of a Kenyan father. In Canada, where two of our most recent governors general were born in Hong Kong and Haiti respectively, high-profile and well-integrated immigrants at the pinnacle of success in either public or private life are increasingly and refreshingly commonplace.

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Among such countries, Canada stands apart as not only being multicultural, but as a country that has actively encouraged multiculturalism through its laws and policies for decades.
Rejecting a sad history of discriminatory immigration and citizenship laws that had at times actively prevented the entry or assimilation of Chinese, South Asian and Jewish immigrants, among others, and turning its back on the attitudes that had led to the internment of Canadians of Japanese descent during World War II, the Canadian government first began actively promoting the integration of immigrants through its multiculturalism policy in the early 1970s. Such policies have been pursued by both Liberal and Conservative governments ever since.

And, eureka, it is working!

Notwithstanding the presence of some critics who continue to question the merits of multiculturalism, our cities now vibrate with colourful cultural influences from all around the world; our private and public sectors are increasingly committed to promoting greater diversity in our boardrooms and legislatures; and most new immigrants to Canada tend to become Canadian in lifestyle and identity in fairly short order, becoming citizens in due course.

Many enlightened Canadian corporations, RBC Financial Group being among the most articulate on this subject, promote diversity not as a concession to public policy, but as a sound business practice, that is good for the bottom line.

This is not meant simply as a collective pat on the back, but to reflect on how fortunate we are in Canada. It should also prompt us to try and understand why it is so.

Long before the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 , waves of immigrants — British Loyalists, Scots, Irish, Ukrainians, Chinese, Jews, Italians, Greeks, West Indians, Turks, Vietnamese, South Asians, Armenians and many, many others — found a country that was already used to welcoming, or at least making room for, people with different languages and cultural traditions.

Second, there was plenty of room. Immigrants were essential to helping a young, vast country like Canada to physically expand its infrastructure and grow its economy. Without the hard physical labour of countless generations of farmers, railroad workers, fishermen, lumberjacks and others willing to confront the physical impediments and challenges of its untrammelled wilderness, modern Canada would never have come into being.

In stark contrast to Canada's successful experience with multiculturalism, we have heard Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel recently state that "the multikulti concept where people of different backgrounds would live together happily does not work in Germany."

At a recent Christian Democratic Party Youth Conference, Merkel went on to say of the foreign workers who came in the early 1960s: "We thought they would not stay. Now we have tried living side-by-side and tried to build a multicultural society. It has utterly failed."

Granted, Germany's history and geography are very different from those of Canada. It does not see itself as a nation built by immigration. Having multiple ethnicities is not a fundamental trait of its identity as it is in Canada, where, as someone once said, the only thing we have in common is that we are all different.

One can point out, however, that Germany needs to recognize that a successful policy of "multikulti" needs to be more than just good intentions. In order to take root and thrive throughout society, the policy must be reinforced by national laws and institutions, as well as by the media, academe, the professions, industry, unions and civil society. Treating foreign workers as temporary "guests" rather than offering them the prospect of citizenship and fulsome participation in Germany's vibrant public life is a sure way to undermine the purported intentions of a national policy of multikulti.

No country that is serious about engendering a sense of social cohesion and national pride by means of a national multiculturalism policy continues to refer to or treat people who have been living in Germany for decades as "guest workers."

Let's invite Chancellor Merkel and the members of her government to Canada. We can take her to visit the site of the Aga Khan's new Centre for Global Pluralism in Ottawa, visit the Michael Lee Chin

Crystal at the ROM, and take tea with Adrienne Clarkson or Michaëlle Jean. In other words, let's invite our German friends to discover the benefits of a "real" multiculturalism policy.

Have we got multiculturalism all figured out, and ironed out all its wrinkles? Perhaps not, but we are certainly developing into a respectful society. And that is a great start.

In fact, Canada's multiculturalism is such a "fact of life" that, for the most part, we are long past debating its merits. We are now at the stage of seeking new and innovative ways of ensuring that its full benefits are enjoyed and applied in all aspects of Canadian public life.

To that end, the Mosaic Institute brings together ethnic Canadians whose homelands are connected to long-standing conflicts. We seek to harness their insights, their connections, and their shared attachment to Canada to help confront and resolve those conflicts. It is the very fact of Canada's diversity that uniquely positions Canadians to do this work.