RENOWNED MANDARIN LAUDS `MULTICULTURAL GAMBLE'

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By Haroon Siddiqui, **The Toronto Star**, 29 October 2009

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Competent and confident, he knew his way around Ottawa and beyond, having been a diplomat in Moscow, Paris and Brussels.

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Yalden was there during the 1967 kerfuffle over Charles de Gaulle's Montreal cry of "Vive le Quebec libre."And during the implementation of the 1965 report of the Bilingual and Biculturalism Commission that, by the by, birthed multiculturalism.

He was Official Language Commissioner (1977-84) in the aftermath of the crisis over the use of French by air traffic controllers in Quebec that prompted their English counterparts to argue that French compromised safety.

His tenure as head of the Canadian Human Rights Commission ('87-96) was marked by his tongue-lashing of "garden variety chauvinists" whining about too many non-whites coming to Canada.

After retiring from the civil service, he was for eight years a member of the United Nations Human Rights Committee (not to be confused with the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Commission).

Yalden, 79, has just released a memoir, Transforming Rights: Reflections from the Front Lines (U of T press, pp 259). Typically, he eschews the personal for an authoritative account of Ottawa over the last five decades. He has salted it with vignettes and opinions.

Of De Gaulle's outburst, he thinks it was prompted by Lester Pearson's "Boy Scout" refusal to sell uranium to France. "This led the general to write off Canada as an American puppet and to throw in his lot more forcefully with nationalist or separatist Quebec elements than he might otherwise have done."

Brian Mulroney, "capable of being vindictive from time to time," denied Yalden a routine pay raise for criticizing the government's treatment of aboriginal peoples.

That remains our "most shameful human rights/discrimination problem." Showing "extraordinary staying power," the aboriginals are not going to go away and will stay on their terms, as they should.

Canada has done well with bilingualism, unlike Belgium, with its highly divisive territorial linguistic arrangements. "Language, like religion, is capable of tearing countries apart. But we've done as well as any country and better than most."

Ditto for pluralism. "Canadians have pulled off their `multicultural gamble' more effectively than one might have anticipated. The policy is solidly anchored and will remain that way."

It's a better tool against terrorism than the war on terror, "a striking illustration of what can go wrong when panic sets in."

"Respect for all cultural traditions is an important weapon, and participation and inclusiveness are even more so, in dealing with marginalization and radicalization, and, by extension, with terrorist violence.

"Deference to the rule of law and due process and fairness in the judicial system – including a humane treatment of those caught out in potentially violent action – must also be allowed to do its work."

The fuss over the niqab is silly, given the tiny numbers involved. "We should avoid interfering in private lives," while backing those working to discourage the practice.

Parts of sharia law are obviously incompatible with the Charter. Kirpans, the Sikh dagger, are fine, so long as they are small and symbolic.

Overall, Canada has the best human rights machinery. What's still missing is "the political and societal determination to make it work."

Second, "handling individual complaints, especially of direct discrimination, is the easy part; the difficult element is the system-wide, half-conscious discrimination based on vaguely accepted stereotypes. And third, the most important consideration for minorities is the capacity of society to

integrate them in a welcoming and generous manner."

Haroon Siddiqui writes Thursday and Sunday. hsiddiq@thestar.ca