What it Means to Belong: Reframing "Accommodation"

in a Multicultural Liberal Democracy

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Rima Berns-McGown
Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies
University of Toronto.
rima.bernsmcgown@utoronto.ca

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Rima Berns-McGown[1]

Abstract:

This paper explores the policy implications of the author's comparative and longitudinal research with Somali Muslim immigrants in Toronto and London, which suggests strongly that successful integration into Western democracies depends, in significant part, on the openness and inclusion of the adoptive society, encouraging immigrants and minorities to feel that they "belong." Openness and inclusion lend themselves to increased connection with the adoptive society, identity shifts that accommodate themselves to democratic behaviour and institutions, and a tendency to view religious and cultural connections as compatible with, and not inimical to, participation in the mainstream democratic society. Conversely, exclusion and "othering" tend to lead to resistance to integration and an increase in isolation and self-segregation, and a view that Western democracies are generally incompatible with non-Judeo-Christian religions and cultural communities.

The "reasonable accommodation" of ethno-cultural communities within the wider society is a problematic framing, implying a power balance that privileges some Canadians – those doing the accommodating – over others – those being accommodated – and a concomitant concern over the "loss" of the exercise of power on the part of the accommodators. True inclusion and openness, on the other hand, involves policy that embodies the assumptions that all Canadians are equally Canadian and have an equal right to imagine, express, and create the ongoing project that is Canada; that cultural practices that are inimical to liberal democracies can be altered or reinterpreted in ways that are not conflictual; and that there is room within the Canadian project for the religious and cultural

[1] Rima Berns-McGown teaches with the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies and the Munk Centre's Master's in International Relations program at the University of Toronto. She can be reached at rima.bernsmcgown@utoronto.ca.

offerings of all ethno-cultural groups. "Accommodation" is best understood as a conversation among equals, a perspective that does not imply a loss of liberal democratic values and is better reframed as "consensual compromise."

Introduction

Contrary to the title of this panel, the issue I want to discuss is not, in fact, a "problem" with, or inherent in, multiculturalism. It is, rather, due to the success of multiculturalism as policy and as ethos. It arises from its centrality in the Canadian social and political fabric and the fact that we as a society take it seriously.

The issue I want to discuss is also, however, critical to the continued success of the Canadian project and will, in my view, determine whether it succeeds in being a true model for the rest of the world, or whether the Canadian model of multiculturalism is ultimately exposed as an exercise in hypocrisy.

When we talk about "accommodation," we are talking about what happens when we take seriously the rhetoric that says that all Canadians – regardless of ethnicity, colour, or religion – are equal in the eyes of the law and of the charter, and have to deal with the sometimes-thorny issues of apparent or real conflicts between the wider society's norms, expectations, and common practices, on the one hand, and those of Canadians whose ethnocultural or ethnoreligious

background might lead, or seem to lead, to different norms and practices, on the other.

“Reasonable accommodation” has become a catchword and an approach, explicitly in Quebec and implicitly elsewhere in Canada: how it is that the wider society “accommodates” the distinctive and potentially conflictual practices of ethnocultural minorities.

Reasonable accommodation was a term initiated by the courts, in judgements intended to point the way for private companies, initially, and then service organizations, to figure out a way around universal demands that allows the needs of minority individuals to be taken into account.

The argument that I want to make today is that a term that is a useful one when it refers to companies or other private institutions becomes extremely problematic when it is transposed to the state or institutions that represent the state.

This is far from a matter of semantics. It is a question of orientation, of power relationships, and of an understanding of who is Canadian and what being Canadian means.

Some important terminology

Before we go any further, I want to clarify how I am using some important terms.

When I talk about integrating immigrants and minority Canadians, I mean integration in a very specific sense. I am not using it the way Gilles Duceppe did last week, as a synonym for forced assimilation.[2] As I use the term, there are two parts to integration: "internal" integration, as experienced by individual newcomers, is the process of combining a world-view, or framework for understanding oneself, one's society, one's culture, etc., that one held before one arrived in Canada with the world-view or framework for understanding self-and-society that one encounters when one arrives here. It is a process, effectively, of weaving two world-views together, and over time one's understanding of one's relationship with society and one's religion, or culture, or customs, etc., shifts and changes. This shift in identity and everything that flows from it is extremely significant.

The point here is that immigrants do not remain frozen in time or a perspective. After some years in a new place, they are not the people they were when they arrived; their ideas on how to live in this new place change over time, sometimes quite radically.

[2] "Duceppe slams 'multiculturalism'," *Globe and Mail*, 11 October 2007, p. A4.

"External" integration, meanwhile, refers to the barriers that immigrants and minorities face. One could speak of an ethnocultural group being perfectly externally integrated when its members can move laterally and vertically across society – economically, politically, or socially – without ethnicity (or colour, or religion) being an issue. The Irish – reviled when they first arrived in the 19th century – can be said to be perfectly externally integrated, for instance. South Asian Muslims and African-Canadians, on the other hand, are not. Some groups obviously face more barriers than others.

The success of multiculturalism as an ethos is due in large part to Canada's political culture, which tends to see immigrants and minorities as legitimately completely "Canadian" once they have earned citizenship and a passport. This stands in sharp contrast to France or other European countries, where studies show that the third and fourth generation citizens still complain of being referred to as foreigners or "immigrants" and differentiated from "true" citizens.

Benedict Anderson talks famously about nations as "imagined communities."[3] The key to Canada's political culture with regard to immigrants and minorities is that they are perceived to have as much right to imagine – and to reimagine – Canada and the Canadian polity as Canadians who have been here for multiple generations or who are not regarded, or don't regard themselves, as "minorities," visible or otherwise.

[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

That ability to imagine the community has translated into an wide understanding of Canada as a country that is proudly diverse – diverse with respect to colour, religion, ethnicity. It creates an ethos that, by and large, respects all Canadians, allows them to be whoever they are comfortable being, and trusts that at the end of the day they will return and acknowledge that respect.

Relative to other immigrant-receiving countries, Canada is living up to its ethos. But relative to the promises of the ethos, Canada is still falling short, and that is what I want to address today.

The rhetoric of the multiculturalism act, particularly when it is combined with the charter of rights and freedoms, leads to an expectation that all individuals to whom it pertains will be treated with deep respect and deep equality.

By deep respect and deep equality, I mean that every Canadian's individual human rights *and voice* – regardless of ethnicity, culture, religion, colour, belief, gender or sexual orientation – have as much weight and as much worth as every other Canadian's – regardless of how long one has been a Canadian.

If multiculturalism does not lead there, it quickly runs into charges of emptiness and hypocrisy, of being a white European hegemonic wolf cloaking itself in the peacock feathers of openness and diversity.

If it does lead there, we must re-examine the idea of “tolerance,” which is so very central to this debate and to the idea of multicultural societies, because it is on this point that the project threatens to stumble.

The notion is that tolerance is central to multicultural societies, because its binary opposite is taken to be intolerance – which is clearly not going to lend itself to an environment in which people of diverse backgrounds can live peaceably and harmoniously together.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center, for instance, takes tolerance to be the answer to bigotry, racism, and anti-Semitism. Its Holocaust museum is the Museum for Tolerance; it offers “Tools for Tolerance” programs and boasts a midtown Manhattan New York Tolerance Center, a “professional development multi-media training facility targeting educators, law enforcement officials, and state/local government practitioners.”

There are solid reasons for the use of this term: Jews have lived in the diaspora for thousands of years, thriving under tolerant conditions, suffering horrifically under intolerant ones.

Yet when one is building a society in which diversity is truly respected and truly equal, tolerance is a deeply problematic term. Moreover, I would argue, it is actually inimical to the Canadian model's claims of deep equality and deep respect for all citizens. And this for three reasons:

First, tolerance implies a differentiation between those who are doing the tolerating and those who are being tolerated. That differentiation is of the centre for the periphery ("we" are tolerating "you"). It implies a power relationship – the tolerators are more powerful than the tolerated.

Second, tolerance implies a putting-up-with something, a holding-one's-nose-and-taking-no-contrary-actions. It stops well short of respect.

And finally, tolerance implies a provisional arrangement. If I am in a position to tolerate you, I am also in a position to withdraw that tolerance when I feel that you cross a line, or when external events affect my sense of generosity.

These are ideas that Wendy Brown explores in *Regulating Aversion*.

"The very invocation of tolerance," she writes, " indicates that something contaminating or dangerous is at hand, or something foreign is at issue, and the limits of tolerance are determined by how much of this toxicity can be accommodated without destroying the object, value, claim, or body. Tolerance

appears, then, as a mode of incorporating and regulating the presence of the threatening Other within."[4]

But even if tolerance is never withdrawn, there is a fundamental contradiction between deep equality and a condition of the tolerating and the tolerated.

This is because we also continue to think in terms of "host societies" in contrast to "immigrant," "minority," or "diasporic" communities – an idea that further embeds the power relationship and its correlation: It is the "host" society that "tolerates" whatever differences it perceives in the immigrant, minority, diasporic communities, and decides what and how to "reasonably accommodate" these differences.

It is this framing that lies behind "reasonable accommodation," which is, effectively, the state or its bodies – like school boards or ministries – representing the "host society" and deciding what it is willing to "tolerate" and what not, and how to draw the line between those two things. (On the other hand, when the courts determine "reasonable accommodation" for private companies, they speak on behalf of *all* Canadians – a completely different framing.)

[4] Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 27.

Research findings on connectedness and integration

I want to turn now to my own research. When I first began talking with Somali refugees in 1995 – my first extensive research project compared their experiences of integration in Toronto and in London, UK – something became starkly obvious.

Somalis experienced racism in both London and Toronto – both colour racism and what's been called cultural racism, or in this case what is also known as Islamophobia. But, significantly, for the most part in Toronto they were not made to feel that they were not "Canadian" – not made to feel that they don't *belong* in this country. They were not made to feel that there is no room for Somalis as Canadians. By and large, this stood in striking contrast to the experiences of London Somalis, who experienced not just racism or Islamophobia but societal exclusion. As they described it, the idea was clearly communicated that regardless of how many generations they were to live in the UK, they would never be "British" – because the definition of Britishness was too narrow to include them, because the message that was consistently communicated to them that they did not "belong" in Britain, and never would.

To my mind, this, in a nutshell, is the difference between the British and Canadian models of multiculturalism, and it is the reason that multiculturalism is perceived by and large to be working in Canada, and to be problematic in Britain.

The issue has nothing to do with whether you “force” people to take on “British values” or “Canadian values,” whatever those are. The issue has everything to do with whether people are permitted to feel that they belong, or made to feel that they do not.

The critical issue is that this difference of place and of political culture affected how that weaving – that internal integration – occurred. Somalis in both cities became more, but differently, religious. In both cities, led primarily by the women, by the way, who had responsibility for keeping families together and because they were terrified that they would “lose their children” to an alien culture – they were more afraid of secularism than of the competition of other religions – Somalis began to study the Qur’an, to hold study groups, to wear the hijab, to be significantly more concerned with the five pillars. In both cities they practised “ijtihad” – independent judgement – determining how they should use the basic text to help them live in the West as Muslims. In both cities, they changed their practice of Islam to be in keeping with the place in which they now lived: birth control, for instance, would never have been okay “back home,” where having a multitude of kids was advantageous, but it was acceptable in the West, where it would have been difficult to support too many children.

Perhaps the most striking example of this has to do with female cutting, or, as it is also known sometimes, female circumcision or female genital mutilation. In Somalia almost all girls were infibulated, because “good Muslim women” were

infibulated – these concepts were inextricable – and without infibulation no fulfilled social or familial life was possible. But in the West, having studied the Qur'an, Somali women recognized that female cutting was not an Islamic prescription. In that case, they reasoned, why are we doing this thing? The link between the concepts of "good Muslim woman" and female cutting were broken, and, for the most part, the practice stopped.

But here's where the difference in external environments comes in. Women began to wear the hijab in both cities. But in Toronto, Somali women described themselves as wearing the hijab as a proud expression of their identity; it didn't stop them feeling Canadian. In London, on the other hand, where they felt excluded by the wider society and were constantly being told they didn't belong, the hijab became a statement of independence and anger; they described wearing it in a spirit of resentment. Similarly, Somali women in London described something of a backlash with regard to female cutting, a desire among some women to continue to perform the ceremony, even in a lesser form, as a way to tell the wider society that it did not have the right to dictate behaviour: "who are you to tell us we're inferior?" they demanded.

This question of belonging is critical, because it translates into a sense of connection. I realize that some recent research contends that second generation Canadians express a greater sense of connection with their parents' homeland,

and that this can been interpreted as a sign of a problematic connection with Canada.

My own work has found that an increased awareness of connection to a "somewhere else" is a natural part of being in a receiving place – Toronto, Vancouver – Canada as a whole – that is heavily diasporic, and that if you pose the question so as not to create false binaries, you find that there are no contradictions between a connection to parental homeland and a strong connection to Canada.

(False binaries always remind me of the verbal game that was played every year in my religious school synagogue classes when I was growing up in Montreal in the late sixties and seventies: are you more Jewish or more Canadian? If Canada and Israel were at war, who would you fight for? How you posed the question determined what answer you got from those kids who were all Canadian-born (except me), and all of them would have considered themselves deeply connected to Canada, regardless of how they answered the question.)

Moreover, the connection to somewhere else often helps to locate a person within Canada and is therefore paradoxically extremely Canadian and very much a part of that definition of Canada-as-proud-centre-of-diversity: my contribution to Canadian diversity is my Koreanness; my contribution is my Somaliness; my contribution is my Venezuelanness, and so forth.

And the more interviews I do and in-depth conversations I have – with Somali women in Regent Park in 2005, with Somali twentysomethings – the generation sometimes referred to as generation one-and-a-half, born in Somalia but who arrived in Canada as toddlers or preschoolers and who were thus socialized here – and with second-generation Canadians from all over the world – the more four things become clear:

1) connection to a somewhere else is not inimical to a strong connection to Canada;

2) meaningful connections are the foundation upon which a sense of citizenship – and the respect for the obligations that are entailed therein – is built;

3) being made to feel that one *belongs* is perhaps the single most important arbiter of a strong sense of connection; and,

4) most importantly, the implication of the above is that the more open, the more encouraging of a sense of belonging the wider society is, the more likely it is that that "internal integration" – that combining or weaving of norms and ways of interpreting cultural beliefs and practices – is going to

happen in a way that is reflective of and comfortable for liberal democratic societies.

In other words, if you make me feel that I belong, I am much more likely to make changes to my understanding of cultural norms and behaviours in a way that is comfortable for liberal democracies.

The converse is true as well: excluded newcomers who are made to feel that they do not belong and never will truly belong do not develop meaningful connections to adoptive wider societies and have no invested interest, therefore, in accommodating the needs of the wider society.

This is why, ultimately, it is in a society's enlightened self-interest to understand the process as a shared project. Alienated, excluded individuals and communities are disaffected at best, violent at worst, vulnerable to clash-of-civilizations ideologies and criminal or terrorist perspectives.

The Multicultural Project as a Shared Project

So what does this mean? It means we need to recast how we think of the Canadian multicultural project. We need to understand that its relative strength, compared with other countries, lies in the space we've created that allows

newcomers to feel a meaningful part of the Canadian project relatively quickly, and we need to act on what we know:

We have to stop talking about tolerance and to talk about moving beyond it. The Canadian multicultural project, to the extent that it works, works because it has created a space that goes well beyond tolerance. Within that space, newcomers are respected as Canadians, to fully participate in the conversation of what Canadians ought to do and say, as Canadians and as equals.

This means that we have to rethink how that conversation is held. We have to stop thinking in terms of "reasonable accommodation" – those of us who are more central, who have more power than others – "accommodating" those who are more peripheral and have less power.

We have to start thinking in terms that befit equal participants in a conversation – let's call it consensual compromise, where the stress is now on equal participants in a conversation squaring conflicting interests.

Subtle but powerful. It is no longer a question of the state or its institutions (established Canadians) accommodating newcomers, but a question of Canadians discussing and coming to terms with each others' interests. The more diverse Canadian institutions become, the easier this will be.

Conclusion

Inclusion and belonging are difficult to measure but absolutely critical to the success or failure of a project of the sort that Canada has embarked upon.

The more included diasporic groups are within the wider society, the more closely aligned are the conversations that happen within groups and between their members, on the one hand, and the conversations that happen between the groups and the wider society, on the other. These are conversations about how to dress (including when playing sports and at the voting booth), what should be taught in schools, how to balance individual and family interests – pretty much everything that consists of the intersection between private and public lives. The more closely aligned those conversations are, the less strife and tension is sewn into the Canadian fabric.

The good news is that we are no longer, I think, in danger of following in Europe's steps: we are too conscious of the value of what we do to allow it to slip away, yet we are still unsure of what is implied by the path we have taken.

Moving beyond tolerance, and thinking about consensual compromise instead of reasonable accommodation, are critical steps if we are to succeed.

In the words of one young Somali adult, “if you don’t make people feel like they belong, they’re going to feel like they’re your enemy.”