

# Let's Talk: A Conversation about Canada and Quebec



## Appraising Interculturalism and Refusing Canada's Constitutional Stalemate

Alain-G. Gagnon

Director, Centre d'analyse politique: Constitution et fédéralisme  
([www.capcf.uqam.ca](http://www.capcf.uqam.ca)) Université du Québec à Montréal

Institute of Intergovernmental Relations  
School of Policy Studies, Queen's University

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*Quebecers our way of being Canadian* opposes constitutional inertia and clearly state's Quebec's willingness to engage in Canadian political life.

The policy affirms and builds on the principles of the Supreme Court reference of 1998 and complements those with a duty to negotiate. Those principles are (1) federalism, (2) democracy, (3) constitutionalism (historical continuity, consent, reciprocity) and the rule of law and (4) the protection of minority rights.

Beyond these commitments, the policy also seeks to ground and expand Canadian diversity in three additional principles.

The first is plurinationalism; that is, a commitment to the presence of distinct political communities that – walking in the footsteps of Renan – have chosen to build a future together and a make the country the expression of a daily plebiscite. The wholehearted adoption of this principle would lead to a more authentic form of Canadian federalism.

It would also help redress past injustices with respect to both the First Nations and Quebec. A serious exploration into Canada's past would make clear that we have been very good at paying lip service to the conflicting claims of political communities, but slow at redressing harm done to certain groups.

The second principle is asymmetric federalism as a way of addressing inadequate representation of provincial interests in federal institutions. Given the plurality of political communities in the Canadian federation, each with distinct culture, some authors – Cass Sunstein and Jeremy Webber among them – lucidly argue that both legislation and judicial review inevitably favour cultural majorities. No government, either central or provincial, can regulate distinct political communities without imposing a dominant cultural legacy. This bias does not merely apply to purely cultural policies. It also applies to economic and other policy areas, all of which have clear cultural dimensions.

The third principle is interculturalism, which I wish to elaborate on so that readers have a better grasp of what it means to Quebecers and why it offers a suitable foundation for cultural pluralism. Interculturalism constitutes Quebec's specific way of managing internal diversity. It pursues five essential goals:

- It maintains French as the dominant language of the political community – seeking, therefore, to secure Quebec's historical continuity and to offer newcomers an equal opportunity to succeed in their new host society.
- It seeks collective integration through an ongoing process of intercommunal interactions. It needs to be stressed that there is an unwritten obligation of all citizens to participate in shaping the political community.
- It offers a response to multicultural premises by de-ethnicizing social relations and by encouraging all citizens to become fully involved through the development of Quebec as a societal culture.
- It encourages all citizens to engage in the development of their community through parliamentary institutions (in preference of courts) with a view of putting contrasting societal projects to rest.

- Finally, it seeks to build a common public culture by reconciling tensions between the majority and minority cultures.

By all accounts interculturalism, like multiculturalism, constitutes a legitimate means to develop ties that bind all citizens in complex political settings.

Considering the negative vision many Quebecers have of multiculturalism – which they often view as an attempt to undermine Quebec's distinct character and portray their community as an ethnic group (Forbes 2007) – it is essential that an intercultural approach be encouraged with a view to welcoming newcomers and eliminating all forms of discrimination.

Many Canadian colleagues outside of Quebec, as well as some within Quebec, argue that there is no real difference between interculturalism and multiculturalism. But this neglects the central weakness of multiculturalism, namely that it can be said to constitute a policy of delayed assimilation.

Quebecers have opted to come up with a concept that is not discredited in order to accommodate their internal diversity.

Now, a word with respect to multiculturalism: It is true that the concept has evolved significantly since it was first designed in 1971. Here is brief history of its evolution:

- Multiculturalism was first associated with ethnicity at the point of origin.
- Then it became a rallying cry for equality and a fight against discrimination for new Canadians. This opened the door for the active participation of newcomers in this struggle.
- This was followed by a phase in which everyone was encouraged to assimilate into broader Canadian society. Canada then became the dominant identifier for all Canadians.

The period from 1988 to now represents a phase during which multiculturalism gradually adopted and adapted the best practices of interculturalism: the participation of newcomers, the struggle against discrimination, and citizen engagement. This change is an important one and needs to be underlined.

In *Minority Nations in the Age of Uncertainty* (2015), I argue that to overcome Canada's challenges with diversity, political actors need to build on three ethical principles: self-restraint, constitutional morality, and binding loyalty. These principles provide the foundation for a process of dynamic dialogue between the majority and the minority cultures. From my standpoint – to the extent that a “renewable compromise” is achievable – these three principles are the preconditions for the consolidation of an authentic federal democratic state. Each is congruent with the three processes encouraged by the Quebec's new affirmation policy, namely (1) multinational federalism, (2) interculturalism, and (3) asymmetric federalism. As such, these pillars provide a firm foundation for building trust and dialogue among citizens both within Quebec as well as between Quebec and the rest of Canada.

**Works Cited**

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