



CHANDLER  
INSTITUTE OF GOVERNANCE

CANADA:  
ENTRENCHING  
MULTICULTURALISM TO  
LAST THE TEST OF TIME



## Canada: A Brief History

Throughout its history, Canada has undergone a remarkable transformation in terms of its ethnic composition and diversity. In its early history, the Indigenous peoples were an integral part of the land for thousands of years, shaping its identity. The 16th century marked a pivotal period as European exploration and colonisation led to cultural exchanges, but also conflicts between Indigenous communities and the newcomers. The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed the influence of British and French colonial powers imprinting distinct linguistic and cultural traits on the nation's landscape, and leaving a lasting legacy as Anglophone and Francophone Canada today.



Breakdown of all the official languages in Canada, with Quebec as the largest majority French-speaking province.  
(Source: Office of the Commissioner of Official Language of Canada)

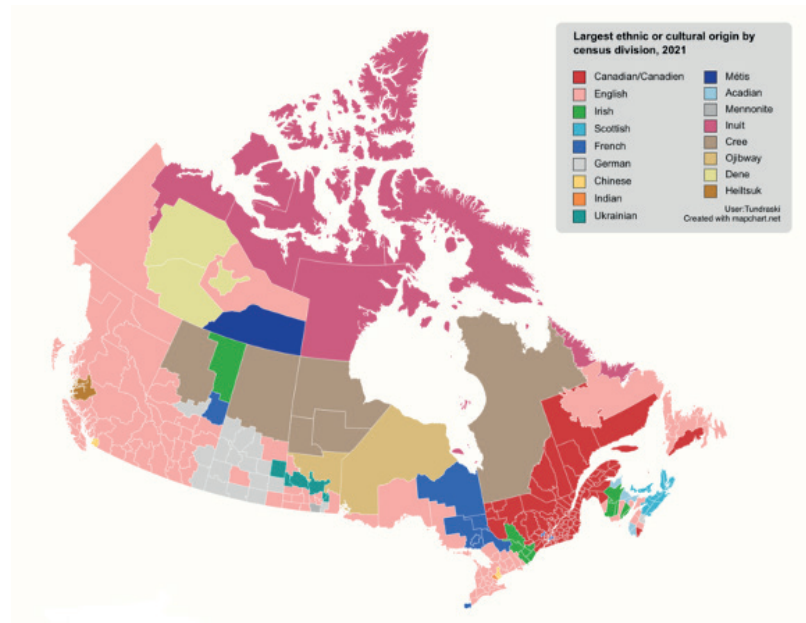


Students at a rally in support of the FLQ, 15 October 1970  
(Source: Getty Images - Graham Bezant, Toronto Star)

From 1963-1970, a group of French Canadians known as the Front de Liberation Du Quebec (FLQ), responded violently to perceived discrimination against French-speaking Canadians and perceived preferential treatment towards Anglo-speaking Canadians. They believed that these were attempts at absorbing traditional French-Canadian ways in favour of greater Canada. The FLQ called for an independent and socialist Quebec, and organised a wave of terrorist attacks that culminated in the bombing of the Montreal Stock Exchange, and the kidnapping of the Labour Minister and British Diplomat in 1969 and 1970 respectively.<sup>1</sup> Then Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, invoked the War Measures

Act at the request of the Premier of Quebec and the Mayor of Montreal, which gave sweeping powers of arrest and internment to the police. While heavy-handed and unprecedented in peacetime Canada, the use of the act was relatively successful in quashing separatist sentiment, and the FLQ slowly faded into obscurity.<sup>2</sup>

The episode, however, brought to the fore the frustrations of French-speaking Canada. The government established a nation-wide commission and investigation process – the Bilingualism and Biculturalism in Canada (B and B Commission) – to investigate how to successfully integrate the two Canadas (French and Anglo), and build a multicultural Canada that was welcoming to all. As the 20th century unfolded, Canada’s multicultural tableau had further expanded with successive waves of immigration from Europe, Asia, and other corners of the globe. The influx of diverse immigrant groups, primarily in search of economic prospects, had further added to the tapestry of diversity. By the 1960s, Canada was effectively a multi-ethnic society



*Breakdown of ethnic origins in Canada*  
(Source: Wikimedia Commons, data from Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population)

comprising of new immigrants, indigenous groups and older settled immigrant populations. Given the wide ethnic diversity in Canada, multiculturalism, rather than biculturalism, eventually became a logical policy tool.

### **Promoting Integration – Fostering Understanding and Awareness of Canada’s Diversity**

In 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to formally adopt an official multiculturalism policy, which was a pioneering move in the context of its time. The government was committed to its policy objectives, and set aside CAD\$200 million over ten years to ensure that multicultural policies were implemented. This included:

1. Setting up a Multicultural Directorate within the Department of State to sponsor programmes to help minorities understand their rights and the new policies that supported their rights.
2. Establishing the Ministry of Multiculturalism, which monitored the implementation and uptake of multiculturalism policies.
3. Establishing the Canadian Consultative Council on Multiculturalism which linked government to ethnic organisations, so that their input was integrated into the government’s decision-making.<sup>3</sup>

“Uniformity is neither desirable nor possible in a country the size of Canada. We should not even be able to agree upon the kind of Canadian to choose as a model, let alone persuade most people to emulate it. There are few policies potentially more disastrous for Canada than to tell all Canadians that they must be alike. There is no such thing as a model or ideal Canadian. What could be more absurd than the concept of an “all-Canadian” boy or girl? A society which emphasizes uniformity is one which creates intolerance and hate. A society which eulogizes the average citizen is one which breeds mediocrity. What the world should be seeking, and what in Canada we must continue to cherish, are not concepts of uniformity but human values: compassion, love and understanding.”

- Pierre Trudeau, explaining the intent of the 1971 Multiculturalism Policy<sup>4</sup>

Under the policy, cultural differences were protected and each cultural group was allowed to participate in mainstream society while maintaining their unique cultural practices and language.<sup>5</sup> Policies were also put in place to support schools in developing programmes to teach minority languages, and included curricula for all students to learn about the contributions and histories of various communities. Money was also made available for maintaining multilingual and ‘ethnic’ newspapers, radio and television. This stood in contrast to many other diverse societies, which emphasised assimilation over accommodation.

Ethno-cultural organisations also received funding for folk festivals and events celebrating their particular cultural heritage.<sup>6</sup> For example, funding was made available for ethno-cultural organisations (e.g. a Ukrainian-Canadian organisation) to promote their unique cultural heritage. From as early as 1972, various Canadian cities began organising multicultural festivals that celebrated the traditions, music, art, and cuisine of different cultural groups within the country. These festivals provided a platform for different communities to showcase their heritage and foster cross-cultural interactions.

One prominent example was the “Caravan” festival in Toronto – a month-long event that celebrated the cultural diversity of Toronto. It featured performances, exhibitions, workshops, and events that highlighted the traditions and contributions of various ethnic communities. This festival allowed people from different backgrounds to come together, share their cultures, and learn about each other’s traditions. Such events not only promoted understanding and appreciation of different cultures, but also created opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to interact and learn from each other. They helped break down stereotypes, reduce prejudices, and build bridges of communication among different communities.



*(Left) A Chinese Dragon Dance performance at the 1976 Caravan Festival;  
(Right) A dance performance at the Vienna Pavilion at the 1972 Caravan Festival.  
(Source: Toronto Star Photograph Archive, Courtesy of Toronto Public Library)*

### **Creating Stakeholdership – Giving all Ethnic Groups a Stake in the Nation**

When the 1971 Multiculturalism Policy was first introduced, there was opposition from minorities who believed the policy was largely symbolic, and were sceptical about whether the policy would translate into real outcomes. From the 1970s to the 1980s, there was debate about the type of multiculturalism programmes that the government should support – should funding be focused on promoting third language education? Or should funding be focused on welcoming new immigrants? In the early 1970s, the programmes were modest and relatively conservative, and largely limited to funding and support for third language programmes. This arose in part due to the dominance of ‘white’ ethnic representation over ‘non-white’ minority groups in the Canadian Consultative Council on Multiculturalism, whose concerns mainly centred on maintaining the learning of their mother tongues.

However, it became clear over time that the demographics of Canada were shifting, and that minority groups needed to have more say in decision-making for multiculturalism to have any real success. Simultaneously, the government supported the Multicultural Directorate by bestowing on it more power and money. In 1977, The Multiculturalism Directorate publicly declared that all government policies needed to reflect the interests of





The Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden was built in Vancouver in 1985 – the first full-size Chinese Garden built outside of China.  
(Source: Shutterstock)

Canada’s ethnic groups, and mandated the appointments of members of ‘ethno origins’ to government boards and crown corporations. With the impetus at the Federal level, provinces soon followed suit with their own multicultural programmes. As early as in 1974, for example, Saskatchewan adopted its own Multiculturalism Act, which gave communities the right to preserve their unique heritage and share it with others, and also pioneered multicultural education with policies aimed at helping immigrants learn English.

“[The policy has] to guarantee that all people of this country are treated fairly, are treated equally, and that recognition is given them for their tremendous contributions that they have made in all walks of life.”

- Norman Cafik, then Minister of State for Multiculturalism, on the Multiculturalism Policy.<sup>7</sup>

### Safeguarding against Tensions – Institutionalising Multiculturalism

Throughout the 1970s, Canada welcomed new immigrants who were non-white from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. The new immigrants were less concerned with celebrating culture, but wanted policies to deal with racial discrimination in housing, education and the job market. The removal of racially discriminatory barriers, such as unfair hiring practices, became a focal point of government-funded programmes and multiculturalism policies. The policy thus evolved from focusing primarily on promoting awareness and appreciation of cultural differences, to institutional change for ensuring inclusivity – for example, more grants were made available for programmes that promoted anti-racism.

In 1982, the government took a further step by incorporating the multicultural policy in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (the Charter) within the Constitution, which involved the “preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians.”<sup>8</sup>



The 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms  
(Source: Library and Archives, Canada)

Its adoption into the Constitution added legislative weight in upholding Canada's commitment to multiculturalism, and was critical in protecting the multicultural reality by giving the courts the power to enforce multiculturalism all the way up to the Supreme Court. An early illustrative example from 1985 was when the Supreme Court ruled in line with the Charter that individuals had the right not to be fired from their jobs, should they choose not to work on religious holidays.

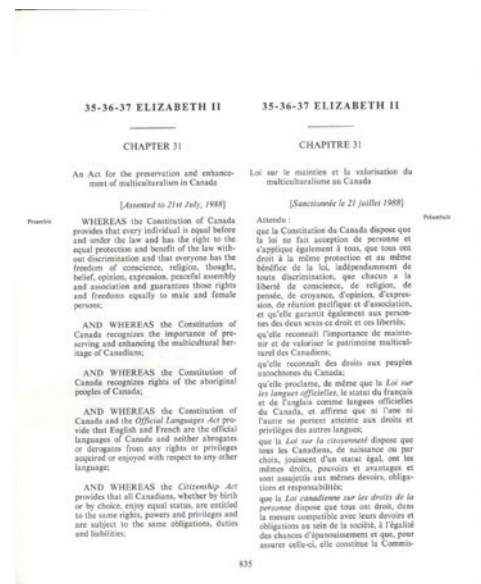
In 1984, a special Parliament committee produced a report calling for the enactment of a new policy on multiculturalism. In 1988, the new multiculturalism policy, known as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, was adopted by Parliament. This was historic not just in Canada but also the world, as Canada became the first country in the world to institute a national multiculturalism law. The Act made the government accountable to Parliament and the public, and remains till today the main legal framework for Canada's multiculturalism policies and programmes. Some comprehensive characteristics of the law include:

1. Aims to remove barriers that exclude any group in Canada from access to Canada's institutions.
2. Increasing minority participation in all major institutions by bringing diversity into all decision-making.
3. All government agencies, not just the ones responsible for Multiculturalism should take leadership by implementing plans, programmes, strategies and procedures that enhance participation of minorities.
4. Establishment of a secretariat to support the government in improving delivery of government services in federal institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Following this law, a number of other laws and government institutions were created specifically to ensure the policy would be broad-reaching in its implementation, and were enacted without significant political resistance.<sup>10</sup> Some examples include:

- 1991 – Establishment of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation Act, which established the Race Relations Foundation. It created a national database on race and racism, provided information on race relations, and launched public awareness campaigns on the importance of eliminating racism.
- 1991 – Creation of the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship, established by Parliament to design programmes in support of race relations, promotion of diverse languages and cultures and to garner more public support for ethnic minorities' participation in society.
- 1991 – Passing of the Broadcasting Act, which included a clause mandating that programming and employment of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reflect Canada's multicultural reality.
- 1995 – Passing of the Employment Equity Act, requiring Federal jurisdiction employers to increase representation of four different groups: women, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and visible minorities.

Over the decades, as the multiculturalism policy evolved to meet Canada's changing demographic, it has retained the same weight, commitment and centrality in Canada's public policy, guiding its approach to immigration, refugees, welcoming newcomers, addressing anti-Muslim sentiment, confronting xenophobia, and balancing the demands of social conservatives.



1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act  
(Source: Library and Archives, Canada)



# PROMOTING INTEGRATION - PRIORITISING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN URBAN PLANNING

As the multiculturalism policy gained legislative clout through the courts, the downstream effects filtered to all levels, as all Canadian planning institutions were subject to the values and laws under the Multiculturalism Policy (1971), the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), and the Multiculturalism Act (1988). Institutions could be challenged in court and face political scrutiny from the electorate if planning practices were perceived to be discriminatory.



*Street sign in Toronto  
(Source: Shutterstock)*

One manifestation of creating space for ethnic minority participation can be observed in Canada's urban planning practices. At the local level, cities are carefully planned to address the diverse concerns of all residents over housing, jobs, services and access to neighbourhood amenities.<sup>11</sup> Considerations over diversity and inclusion range from ensuring that planning guidelines accommodate the construction of different places of worship such as mosques and synagogues, to making sure that ethnic representation is visible in the city's signage, street names, and symbols. In planning for recreational spaces, many Canadian cities are now moving beyond designating spaces for orchestras, museums, or sports halls for hockey and baseball, to including spaces for Bollywood dances, Latin dancing, cricket and other more global types of recreation.<sup>12</sup>

Over the decades, most larger cities in Canada have now made it a norm for ethnic minorities to participate in citizen decision-making at the city level. To support participation, translation and interpretation is provided at public meetings, and citizen meets-ups are often deliberately held at culturally-specific community centres. Task forces for mediation and negotiation have also been established to mitigate conflicting interests between different ethnic groups.

## Safeguarding Multiculturalism – An Enshrined Element of Canadian Identity

In 2011, when the Conservatives were in power, they attempted to downplay multiculturalism in citizenship guides, and placed greater emphasis on Canada's British history. They made the citizenship tests harder, particularly for poorer and newer immigrants, and reduced funding for multiculturalism programmes. In the 2015 elections, the Conservatives further campaigned to protect Canada from supposedly adverse effects of diversity, particularly stoking anti-Muslim sentiment. They pushed to prevent the niqab from being worn during citizenship oaths and at work in the civil service, claiming it was a 'barbaric cultural practice'. The comprehensive legal framework for the multiculturalism policy, however, prevented the Conservative government from undermining it, and the Supreme Court ultimately overturned the government ban on the niqab.

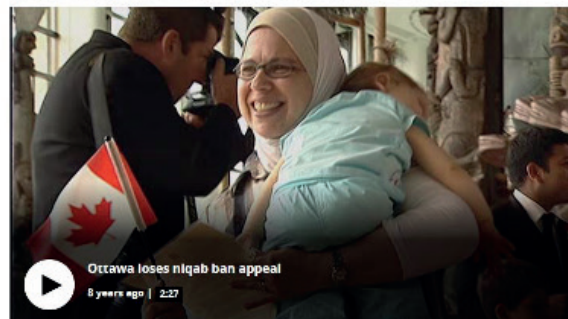
Even as Conservative voices grew, mirroring the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment around the world, multiculturalism remained a core part of being Canadian. The earlier foundations seeded by decades of multicultural policy implementation, legislation and mainstreaming had taken such root in society that it even demonstrated its power to sway elections. In 2015, the Conservative government only agreed to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees that year – a move they claimed would protect the Canadian way of life. This was in stark contrast with the United States, which confirmed 20,000 resettlement submissions, and Germany, with 40,000 confirmed pledges. Public sentiment in Canada quickly turned on the Conservative government's xenophobic approach, which was particularly jarring as it coincided with

### Niqab ban at citizenship ceremonies unlawful, as Ottawa loses appeal



Appeal Court rules so woman has chance to take oath and vote on Oct. 19

CBC News · Posted: Sep 16, 2015 2:26 PM EDT | Last Updated: September 16, 2015



Ban on niqab at citizenship ceremonies unlawful

9950 comments

The ban on wearing the niqab at citizenship ceremonies was deemed unlawful by the Court of Appeal  
(Source: CBC News Online, screengrab)

the extensive media coverage at the time of how the body of three-year old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi had washed up on Turkish shores. It emerged that Alan, his mother, and his brother had drowned trying to reach Europe, after their application for refugee status was denied by the Canadian government. This became a major election issue as Canadians felt that the Conservative government had betrayed Canada's welcoming and multicultural heritage by not accepting a larger number of refugees. In the last weeks of the campaign, public support for the Conservatives dipped and the Liberals won that election. The Liberal government immediately raised the quota for refugees to 25,000 and reversed the funding decline for multiculturalism and anti-racism programmes.<sup>13</sup>

**“It’s why we lost...we allowed ourselves to be portrayed in the last election as unwelcoming. That was a huge mistake.”**

*- Chris Alexander, Former Immigration Minister and a Conservative, on the 2015 Elections .<sup>14</sup>*



Canada's history of nurturing multiculturalism is a good example of how sound public policy adapted and evolved to meet the changing demands of an increasingly diverse demographic through a consultative process. Canada was able to use public policy to ensure that multiculturalism became enshrined in the country's identity and was able to withstand changes in government. Today, multiculturalism has become so integral to what it means to be Canadian, that in a survey from September 2021, Canadians mentioned multiculturalism and the country's inclusivity as what makes Canada unique – more than maple syrup!<sup>15</sup>

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How did Canada entrench multiculturalism and ensure it would last regardless of which government was in power?
2. What are some laws and policies that your country has enacted to promote unity in diversity, and how might these laws and policies be implemented to withstand changes of government?

<sup>1</sup>Guo, Shiba, and Wong, Lloyd (eds.), *Revisiting Multiculturalism in Canada, Theories, Policies and Debates* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2015)

<sup>2</sup>Bélanger, Claude, 'Chronology of the October Crisis, 1970, and its Aftermath' (Quebec: Marianopolis College, August 2000)

<sup>3</sup>Brousseau, Laurence, and Dewing, Michael, 'Canadian Multiculturalism' (Ottawa: Library of Parliament, 2009)

<sup>4</sup>Graham, Ron (ed.), *The Essential Trudeau* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998)

<sup>5</sup>Guo and Wong (2015).

<sup>6</sup>Bakhov, I. S., 'Government Multicultural Policy in Canada in the Period of 1970-2000-s', in *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research*, 15(10), 1450-1454 (2013)

<sup>7</sup>Schiffer-Graham, Beate, 'The Federal Policy of Multiculturalism in Canada (1971-1988)' (University of Manitoba, 1989)

<sup>8</sup>Brousseau and Dewing (2009)

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Banting, Keith, 'Multiculturalism Policy in Canada: Conflicted and Resilient', in Evert Lindquist and others (eds), *Policy Success in Canada: Cases, Lessons, Challenges* (Oxford, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 15 Dec. 2022)

<sup>11</sup>Qadeer, Mohammad Abdul, and Agrawal, Sandeep Kumar, 'The Practice of Multicultural Planning in American and Canadian Cities', in *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, Vol. 20, Issue 1 (Institute of Urban Studies, 2011)

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Banting (2022)

<sup>14</sup>"Chris Alexander on 'Barbaric Cultural Practices': 'It's Why We Lost'", CTV News (9 October 2016)

<sup>15</sup>Adams, Michael, '50 Years of Multiculturalism: It's as Canadian as Maple Syrup', in *Canadian Geographic* (7 October 2021)



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