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## **Identity Revolution**

Over the past century, Canada's national identity has been dramatically altered. Royal Commissions on the Status of Women and Aboriginal Peoples, and the Multiculturalism Policy of 1971 have all emerged from and contributed to Canada's identity shift. Public policy, and national values and beliefs continue to be changed by Canada's shifting population. Naomi Klein and Neil Bissoondath both offer their opinions and views on Canada's identity revolution. Through their discussions they mention everything from Quebec's civic nationalism to the true purpose of multiculturalism. This essay seeks to explore their views while introducing some new points on the question of Canada's identity revolution.

Neil Bissoondath, an internationally recognized author and cultural commentator, made his opinion on Canada's identity quite clear over two complex articles. Bissoondath feels that Canada's identity has yet to be resolved. His view is based on his belief that Canadians do not know their own history, which is interfering with their national identity. He discusses Canada's flawed sense of multiculturalism, and how it drags the private identity into the public identity, causing a destructive imbalance. He also examines Quebec's "civic nationalism" and through it justifies his feelings that fully realizing the personal self is the key to an accepting citizenry. Ultimately, Bissoondath tells us that to resolve the Canadian identity, Canadians need to return the private and public identities to their proper domain while fully embracing their complex past.

Naomi Klein is an internationally renowned Canadian journalist, who over two articles makes clear her belief that Canada has had no identity revolution. Through her articles, Klein addresses the role of minorities in Canadian identity, the current "victim culture" monopolizing Canadian politics, as well as Canada's lost past and the true goals of multiculturalism. Naomi Klein feels that Canada needs to get back to the days when it was building something, and that Canadians need to look back honestly in order to see the glorious opportunities of the future.

When Bissoondath introduced the importance of embracing all of Canada's past to forging a healthy national identity, I wasn't exactly sure what he meant. Wasn't the past exactly what was driving Canadians apart? But with Naomi Klein's contribution, I began to understand. Both private and public identity are largely defined by the past. Therefore a country without a past cannot possibly have an identity. But how does a country reclaim its past? Clearly a large part of it is through education – encouraging a full appreciation and examination of Canada's history, without the after-school-special spin it is often given. Encouraging young Canadians to explore and learn Canada's history is surely one way to improve the national identity, but how else?

When Bissoondath talks about Quebec's new "civic nationalism" he mentions that today Quebecers are searching for the similarities and commonalities between each other, rather than focusing on the differences. This is something Naomi Klein also mentions, but in a different way. She says that as Canadians, we need to see the commonality in our past and allow it to both challenge and unite us. It is clear that this is the key to strengthening Canada's national identity today, and in the future. Finding the similarities between the stream of immigrants that have continued to arrive in Canada since the 1600s, and the people who were here before them, is the only way to find unity and identity. But how can we do this?

The answer to finding the similarities between our pasts and present is simple: Canadians need to take a step back, transcend their definitions, and take a good look at what they see. Of course, the only way one can do this is to fully realize oneself personally. Only then will a person be able to clearly see those around them. This brings me to a point made by Bissoondath. He said that individuals need to transcend their ethnicity as a society needs to de-emphasize it. While I understand his meaning, I feel that the words he has used are dangerous and can easily be misinterpreted. Ethnicity is an integral part of the self – a large part of one's private identity – and while Bissoondath suggests people transcend their ethnicity, I do not think he means they ought

to abandon it. After all, it is a large part of what creates the private identity – it affects one's language, traditions, culture, musical interest, and the myriad of other things that influence the private identity. When Bissoondath suggests we ought to transcend our ethnicity, he simply means that we need to be able to see beyond it.

The issue of multiculturalism is brought forth by both authors, and both authors harshly discredit the policy that so many Canadians identify with. They call it a front for segregation, a tool for political manipulation, and little more than marketing. While it is difficult to argue that these points are not valid, it is impossible to suggest that multiculturalism has not done many good things for Canada. The policy itself, one of inclusiveness and openness in the government and society, is something that should be praised, not condemned. While the results have not been desirable – “ethnic themeparks” putting on “costume displays” to show that Canada has outgrown its colonial viewpoints – you must closely consider the other impacts multiculturalism has had on Canadian society and identity. The number of immigrants entering Canada has remained steady, and although there are countless problems with Canada's immigration system, and although to date the newcomers to Canada have been treated as though they have no affect on our society, this cannot remain the case forever. While it cannot be argued that multiculturalism has segregated Canadians into distinct groups, one can concede that there is still some good to come from the policy. As both authors agree, there is a common ground to be found among all Canadians: the steady stream of people who have chosen Canada as their home, and the people whose land it was before they arrived. This is Canada, the true national identity we have yet to discover. And this Canada has been shaped, at least in part, by the multiculturalism policy.

In one article, Canada's search for identity is mocked when compared to the United States' sense of national pride. While it is impossible not to compare two countries as closely bonded as Canada and the US, one must recognize the enormous differences that exist between the two. After all, Americans have nearly 100 years of identity building on us Canadians. While it is argued by both authors that the mosaic dream is a lie, it is still very different than the American melting pot. I for one would argue that although the mosaic dream is flawed, it still offers advantages much more desirable than those the melting pot offers. Who says that Canadians need a specific national identity comparable to that of the United States? Isn't the beauty of Canada the ability to choose? At one point Bissoondath addresses the “fetish” Canadians have for foreign cultures – a fetish he believes is born out of a lack of national identity. One might argue the opposite – that this foreign fetish is born out of the very things that make Canada such a unique country; the ability to choose, and to define oneself.

When considering the Canadian national identity, both authors address Quebec's nationalist identity claims and both recognize this claim as a credible one. But how credible can a claim to an individual national identity be in a country with no recognized national identity? This is not to say that the Quebecois do not have a legitimate claim for sovereignty. After all, they have been nurturing and protecting their culture and traditions since the 1600s. This has easily involved to a sense of nationalism responsible for Quebec's nationalist revolution. However, what about the recent changes in Quebec? What about that new “civic nationalism” Bissoondath mentions? Maybe Quebec's battle to protect their French culture has made them better identity builders than the rest of Canadians. Could this account for this new civic nationalism based more on finding the similarities between people than on anything else? This new social attitude emerging from Quebec's youth may just be the most distinctly Canadian thing in Canada – something the rest of Canada hasn't quite been able to grasp yet.

The negative views put forth in these articles about Canada's identity revolution are at times overwhelming. After all, a national identity does not appear overnight. It develops slowly, over time. And right now it is changing. One might say it is in a state of flux – stuck between the days of rapid and dramatic change that brought on constitutional reform and national policy changes, and a new period we have yet to experience. One might even suggest that the period we occupy now is one of building – the opposite of what Klein suggests we are doing. Consider the many instances changing public values and beliefs that have emerged recently. Multiculturalism has

caused questions to be asked about the legitimacy of Canada's Europeanized education system. Not only are people talking about including a wider view of Canadian history, but also of including wider views on politics, art, mathematics, and literature. First Nations peoples are attracting more attention with protests over land claims, treaty rights, and poverty on reserves, and thusly generating more national discourse on Aboriginal rights issues. The government is taking accountability for past mistakes, such as apologizing to the living survivors of Japanese internment camps. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is continually changing the legal structures of Canada, as well as altering society's beliefs and values – and isn't this at the heart of identity?

It is a naïve assumption to make that a national identity will simply appear, flawless and whole. It will creep up on us slowly, and the road to our identity will be a rocky one. The fabric of our society will change to slowly affect our identity. Canada's changing population may one day help put to rest the countless unity debates within Canada. Equally important issues are slowly coming to the forefront of Canadian minds – issues other than the French-English question and East and West alienation.

The best hope for Canada's national identity lies with the country's youth. As Bissoondath said of young Quebecers, the new generation of Canadian youth are confident about who they are. Young Canadians aren't struggling with the question of a national identity. They see Canada as a country of openness and opportunity. They are rejecting the sense of victimization their parents have nurtured. They are embracing Canadian literature, music, and changing social values. But most of all, they are aware of their country. Canadian youth are aware of the American definition of national identity and are questioning what being Canadian means. For example, consider the young boy from Quebec who went to the Supreme Court to defend his right to wear a religious knife to school. But most of all, young people are finding many things to be proud of, without looking to another country, while still managing to acknowledge and respect the many problems facing Canadian society.

The key to the Canadian national identity is directly in front of us, and directly behind us. Canadians need to transcend their personal selves before taking a look at what surrounds them. Once this is done, Canada will finally be able to see the identity of its citizens. Canadians need to be able to find and embrace all the commonalities between all who inhabit our country. Once these essential truths are revealed, the opportunities for the future will be breathtaking. To help them on this journey, Canadians need to look towards Quebec and towards the nations' youth. We need to transcend the blinding issues of the past. Once we do this we will be able to see the strength and unity hidden by the national debates. Then, and only then, will Canada's national identity revolution reach a point worth celebrating.