

Candidate: Jesse Shulman
Topic: Identity Revolution

Canada's Identity Evolution

"Identity politics is more timely now than it ever has been. In 2010, we housed the Winter Games in our mountains and stadiums and we maintained a stable economy amidst sub-prime mortgage chaos. Now the world's eyes are on us, and it's time we asked ourselves who we are."

— Michael Ignatieff

In the eighth grade, my history teacher flicked the lyrics of "O Canada" onto the projector. He asked the class what it was about our national anthem that encapsulated the Canadian identity. Knowing he was a secularist who hated conscription, I said, deviously, *Well, the line 'Canada we stand on guard for thee' sounds like disturbing propaganda if taken literally.* Good, but it's even easier. *Is it the mention of God?* Easier.

At that point I shut up.

What I'd missed *was* easier: the lyrics. Written in both French and English, our anthem illuminates the controversy over Canada's identity. "Our nation is a divided one," my teacher explained. Canada has always been a dichotomy, with the French on one side of the river and the redcoats on the other. Since 1774's Quebec Act, the Quebecois met accommodation rather than assimilation, and were allowed to keep their land, culture, and language intact, creating a francophone island in English-speaking waters. From that day, Canada has been split. We are so divided that when Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia and asked our support, we kept tight-lipped, fearing that any nod of approval might send the wrong message to Quebec separatists. And separatists are no small minority. In the 1995 referendum, the margin Lucien Bouchard faced defeat by was 49.42% "Yay" to 50.58% "Nay". "Secede to succeed" was a phrase half the population might've welcomed. My teacher explained all this conflict by pointing out the two languages our anthem is sung in.

What my teacher forgot was a third language; in Nunavut, Aboriginals sing "O Canada" in Inuktitut. Our country is more than just the French and the English. The names in my circle of friends range from Angulalik to Hassan to Sujin. Driving across Toronto sometimes feels like wandering a museum of ethnology - on Bathurst, the black-hat wearing Jews walk to the

synagogue, on Gerard Street, Indian women sparkle in scarlet silk saris, and on Spadina, Chinese sell lychees and exotic fruits. In Toronto 1947, the non-white population was 20%. Now that percentage is 42. Yet we continue clinging to an outdated history of Canada, that Ms. Klein calls the “Two Founding Nations” paradigm, where our country’s genetic make-up is seen as French and British, and only French and British. Even my egalitarian history teacher tripped into this pitfall, failing to remember the Inuits.

What Ms. Klein asks is why, despite our dramatic shift in ethnic composition, there’s been no dramatic shift in the question of who’s Canadian. On Parliament Hill, raised voices are yelling about the same stone-age issues we’ve heard since Prohibition era: “Torontocentrism, Quebec sovereignty, Western and Eastern alienation – problems that can’t be solved unless someone moves the Rockies or sinks Montreal...Canada’s disenfranchised minorities must first convince their oppressors to stop crying victim themselves.” High rates of Aboriginal suicide and criminal behaviour, glass ceilings for women, and gangs weeding up in immigrant communities are all issues unvoiced in the House of Commons. Canada is a leader in multiculturalism and inclusion, but in numbers more than in policy. Ms. Klein asserts that “There has been no ‘identity revolution’ in Canada - if anything...a devolution, with the old battles of confederation occupying even more space in the national discourse...Until the core questions of nationality have been resolved, everything else will be secondary.”

So how do we go about creating Canadian unity? *Do we ensure that every debate hears the perspective of the already-vocal Maritimers, British Columbians, Quebecers and Ontarians?* Easier. *Do we mass-produce Canadian flags, so that there’s enough to stick one on every building?* Easier.

How do we go about creating Canadian unity? We stop trying. Instead of catering to the East-West, French-English perspective, what we need to do is include the unheard players in this political drama.

Both Mr. Bissoondath and Ms. Klein agree that a sense of national identity and pride sprouts from national history; our problem is that our national history isn’t so pretty. Since Canada’s inception, policy has teeter-tottered from netting in as many immigrants as possible to fill the empty tracts of wilderness, to keeping the country as purebred as possible, composed only of whites loyal to the Crown. It’s because of this, both historians admit, Canadians don’t have the same pride in our country that Chinua Achebe had for Nigeria or that W.B. Yeats had

for Ireland. To us, Canada's history is bleak. Instead of remembering a romantic adventure to colonize unknown territory, we remember the Native Americans who watched their lands ripped from their hands. Instead of being starry-eyed at our country's railroads, we remember the underpaid 'coolies' and 'Chinamen' who died to build them. Canadians don't sing their anthem, and when they do, it's at the opening of a hockey game.

The times we're proud to be Canadian are the times Canada does something for us to be proud of. Lester B. Pearson's role in the Suez Canal Crisis, the Montreal Protocol against ozone depletion - these events reminded us we have a part to play in the global theatre, that we peacekeep rather than police, and that we speak for the planet when no one else is willing to. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970, the Multiculturalism Act a year later, and every other breakthrough in expanding what it means to be a Canadian citizen - these are the monuments of Canada's past that make us smile. It's when we're not trying to manufacture unity coast-to-coast and language-to-language that we give Canadians policy to take pride in, and national pride is national unity. Most everything we hate about our history - the Japanese internment camps in WWII a prime example - stems from some act of exclusion or racism, and if we want to cultivate cultural self-worth, inclusion and acceptance are the virtues we need to grow.

This issue is personal to me. I am a secular Jew whose family has lived in Canada for generations. The story of the *SS St. Louis* always makes me shiver. 936 Jewish refugees had given everything they had to escape the clutches of the Reich, and when their ship arrived in Canada in May 1939, even though it meant the refugees would have to return to Europe, they weren't allowed on Canadian soil. It was public then - as any Google search of "Antisemitism in Canada" will uncover - that Canadians classified Jews as vermin. Canada entered WWII because of Britain, not the concentration camps, and in a wartime Gallup poll, Jews were ranked the most vile race other than "the Krauts and Japs." This casual racism doesn't belong in the 21st century, yet the remnants are still here. Every few months I hear some student yell in a hallway, "damn vending machine jewed me out of five bucks," or when a new acquaintance finds out I'm Jewish, as if it were cancer, "Don't worry man, a bunch of my friends are kikes and they're alright." If this is the racism against Jews, a group of whites, how widespread do you think casual racism is against non-whites?

The Great Canadian Question asks: “what political and cultural changes will Canada's identity revolution bring next?” The demographics are public - over 450,000 new immigrants per year - and the plan of action is clear; we need to reflect Canada’s ethnic diversity in policy, not just population graphs, we need to wash away any remnants of racism, and we need to include, not exclude, non-white ethnic cultures.

This argument’s loudest critic is Mr. Bissoondath, but that itself reeks of irony, considering how the Trinidad-born author’s protagonists often grieve the loss of their culture; his best known fiction, *The Worlds Within Her*, features a woman returning to her Caribbean birthplace to sprinkle her mother’s ashes, the lost mother symbolizing the lost homeland. Despite this mixed message, Mr. Bissoondath says we need to reject multiculturalism, because such a mosaic of cultures can never coalesce and create one work-together whole. His message is that the multiculturalism we foster has begun to fester, and now we’ve lost any cultural identity that can be called uniquely Canadian.

There’s a key element I feel this argument lacks. In accepting so many different cultures, we have begun to create our own. Canada is becoming a haven.

Though there are the remnants of racism we still need to rid ourselves of, we are moving, and hopefully will continue to move, towards a society of fairness, where ethnic groups aren’t “tolerated,” but accepted, and recognized as part of the Canadian identity. Two of the mentors I most respect are Elly Gotz, a survivor of the Holocaust who was there when the black boots marched through Poland, and Reem Aweida-Parsons, a woman who saw grenades smash through her window in the Lebanon Civil War. They now live in Canada. Both were nearly killed because of their ethnicities and both fled from Beirut and Berlin to South Africa, Algeria, and America, only to find persecution there too. It took each over ten years of nomadic wandering before they found their Eden in the North: Canada, the all-embracing land of the silver birch, where “us” and “them” become “we”. Both said that any Canadian who isn’t proud of their country simply doesn’t realize how much they have to be proud of. Canada accepts other cultures, and in doing so, has made that a core characteristic in its own identity. Canada is becoming an oasis, in which persecution has no place, and all peoples are given equal voice.

After all, the Inuit sing “O Canada” too.