

CONGRESSIONAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Pursuit of Peace and Happiness: A Fellow's View of the Sociopolitical Underpinnings of Pluralism in Canada

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INTRODUCTION

Booing. Cheering. Asking. Answering. Heckling. Bickering. Clapping. Complaining. Challenging. A minister criticizes the prime minister to his face in front of the world, and what happens next is shocking: the prime minister nods and claps. Touché. Another minister opens a new subject with a lengthy monologue in a new language. For a few moments, I listen to the flow of the syllables because even if I could make out the words I would not understand them. She ends with a question, and the prime minister stands and delivers an answer in the language of the questioner. I am in Canada's House of Commons.

Every sitting day, the House of Commons spends 45 minutes in question period "to seek information from the Government and to call it to account for its actions" (Parliament of Canada 2015). There, the prime minister sits with all of the other ministers, and in French and in English, answers to opposition. All in one, the chamber fills with chaos and choreography; umbrage and conversation; and, ultimately, a display of both discordance and harmony.

Through the American Political Science Association Congressional Fellowship Program, I toured Ottawa for a week, and saw a society in which pluralism reigns. From the foundations of what makes a society—politically, economically, religiously, socially, and even historically—the players and powers in Canada are plural. This essay portrays my impressions of how this pluralism functions.

POLITICAL PLURALISM

The scene of parliament in action embodies the pluralism of the political culture. Prior to delving into what happens when the chambers are in session, it is important to note that members attend. I observed that when a member stands up, the senator or minister faces a legislative body that is full, rather than one occupied by empty chairs. This attendance creates space for increased interactions and dialogue, not simply to advance individual agendas, but also to engage with other perspectives. Watching from the gallery, I was surprised to find even prime minister Justin Trudeau in attendance. I can liken this impression to what it would have been like to walk into the United States Senate Gallery and spot vice president Joe Biden on the floor. However, in the Canadian Parliament, the attendance of the prime minister is nothing extraordinary. The PM is expected to attend regularly, providing an

opportunity for the opposition party to directly confront the government's agenda and policies. The attendance coupled with the procedural periods for questions and discussions fosters healthy dissent, a bedrock for pluralism.

The two official languages, French and English, insert a mandatory linguistic pluralism in the political process. Simultaneous translators interpret the discourse from one language to the other, and legislators who are not bilingual tune into the second language with an electronic headset. This default bilingual framework creates not only a political acceptance for two languages, but a political obligation to respect both French and English. This embrace of two languages represents an acceptance of different ways of thinking. While the languages share the same subject-verb-object syntax and common Latin roots, differences exist, including in grammar rules, verb tense usage, gendered pronouns, and auxiliary verbs. Utilizing both languages seamlessly accommodates two systems of communication. While the words can be translated on paper and interpreted in speech, nuanced differences inherent to the systems remain, resulting in a political process that by definition is plural in communication. In Parliament, I also noticed that even the pronunciation of the country—though it is "Canada" in both languages—differed depending on the language of the speaker, from the French emphasis on the final vowel to the English pronunciation that is familiar to American ears. The duality of languages opens the door for embracing multiple notions of identity, creating a space for pluralism in civics.

During our trip, we learned about the manners in which ministers and senators are elected and appointed to serve—a process that results in representation that is pluralistic. We learned that for the upper chamber, the Governor General appoints Senators on the advice of the Prime Minister. Senatorial candidates must own property and live in the geographical division for which they are appointed. Senators are appointed to bolster the representation of groups that are underrepresented in Parliament, such as indigenous peoples, visible minorities, and women. We learned that appointment lasts for life, providing Senators the flexibility to work on advanced, long-term, less-politically driven policies. In 1958, James Gladstone, the first indigenous Canadian was appointed to the Senate, two years before indigenous Canadians won the right to vote. While Senator Gladstone's appointment represents a historic addition for a more plural representation, his work also contributed to increased plurality, including the full enfranchisement of Aboriginal peoples.

For the House of Commons, members are elected in single-member districts (registered Canadian citizens over the age of 18 residing in the riding). The agency that runs the electoral process, Elections Canada, is independent and nonpartisan. Tight regulations limit campaign spending. The normal election period lasts 36 days.

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Elections Canada sets constituency boundaries based on the census and redistricts every 10 years according to the latest census in this nonpartisan manner that systematically prevents gerrymandering. The electorate includes people in prison. The groups that vote at lower rates have included Aboriginals, youth, and recent immigrants. Nevertheless, the campaign finance rules, election period, districting procedures, and generally diverse electorate seem to result in the election of ministers that better represent the electorate.

Finally, the presence of multiple political parties in Canada seems to ensure that plurality and populace prevail over binary ideologies. Canada has a long tradition of 3rd and 4th parties, and currently five parties are represented in the House of Commons. The multitude of parties provides for a multitude of perspectives, and prevents any single issue from becoming a litmus test that divides Canadians. The multiple parties ensure that diverse and competing ideas and centers of power continuously exist. While the dominant two parties reap rewards in parliamentary procedures structured around the government and the opposition, the legislative procedures rank

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information over ideology. Committees have no partisan staff; the Library of Parliament provides analysts to each committee. This informative, data-driven approach paves the path for policies that seem neither black nor white, but rather plural in shades of gray.

ECONOMIC PLURALISM

The economic regulations in Canada are tight and at times appeared exceedingly so to my American lens. It would be hard to speculate the extent to which tight regulations promote or hinder pluralism. However, I got the impression that strong regulations in campaign finance appear to facilitate civic engagement for the average Canadian. The prohibitions against very large contributions and against corporate donations increase the impact of small individual contributions, which may help incentivize giving. The price caps also lower the cost of running an election, which may expand the sphere of who would consider entering as a candidate. In these ways, the elections regulations may promote pluralism.

Canada's economy is distinctive in one way that ensures a pluralistic society. That is, the Canadian economy is a spur for immigration. In fact, Canada has one of the highest per capita immigration rates in the world. Historically, the government has actively promoted and facilitated immigration to harness the country's vast geographic and resource rich landmass—Canada has one of the world's largest supplies of natural resources including oil, metals, and lumber, and one of the world's smallest population densities, with 4 individuals per square kilometer of land area in 2014, compared to 35 individuals/sq. km. in the United States (The World Bank Group 2016). Canada has addressed a resulting need for labor through its immigration policies. During our visit, the prevailing immigration priority surrounded Syrian refugees—the debate seemed to be not about whether to accept them; it was about how to expedite their arrivals and promote resettlement. At the same time, while all of Canada's major political parties have supported immigration, the Syrian refugee crisis has challenged this tradition. Former prime minister Stephen Harper's platform eventually involved allowing in 10,000 Syrian refugees with priority for those from ethnic and

religious minorities (e.g., Levitz). Current Prime Minister Trudeau's platform welcomes 25,000 Syrian refugees without priority based on ethnicity or religion. The former policy that took ethnicity and religion into account was criticized as disproportionately excluding Syrian Muslims, the religious majority, from resettling in Canada, and the current policy is effectively challenging it.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

In my first glance of Parliament from a distance, I saw a beautiful sandstone gothic structure composed of a series of extended towers, with the middle one soaring high into the sky, capped by an aged copper roof shining green. It looked majestic, and if I did not know otherwise, I would have assumed that it was a place of worship, like a cathedral. As I drew closer to the splendid edifice, I found more and more familiar elements of a cathedral: vast portal-shaped arches, modest and rustic wooden doors, a large clock at the top, inspiring and daunting gargoyles and grotesques, clusters of arched windows, and intricate stained glass designs. When I

walked through the humble wooden doors, and found myself tiny compared to the high ceilings above my head, I felt, for a moment, like I was indeed standing in a cathedral. While it felt odd to be in a secular government building and feel so strongly reminded of a house of God, there was something reassuring about that contrast. It appeared that the government is comfortable enough with religion to showcase its architectural beauty without adhering to it, which is a mark of a society that is comfortable accepting a plurality of faiths without shying away from faith itself.

During our study tour, we were honored to meet the Speaker of the House of Commons, Geoff Regan. Speaker Regan greeted each fellow one by one, and when he reached me, he said, "Asalam-Alaikum," which means, "Peace be upon you." That simple gesture made me feel incredibly welcome. I sensed an impressive comfort with religion and an understanding of different faiths. As I learned more about the House, and met members of Parliament, I was overjoyed to meet and learn that the members are almost as diverse as Canadians, representing the major religions in Canada including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Both in the representation of members of parliament, and in the kindness that I experienced, I sensed an embrace of plurality in religions.

Canada does not explicitly separate church and state in its constitution; however, in practice, the two are entirely separate. A primary purpose in separating the two is to prevent the government from interfering with religion. The Canadian approach accomplishes this purpose through the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which effectively prohibits government from interfering with religious practice. The Charter protects "freedom of conscience and religion" as a fundamental freedom and states that "every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, religion..."¹ Taken together, the Charter gives rise to the Canadian concept of equal religious citizenship or religious pluralism, in which every Canadian is free to practice accordingly (Ryder 2008).

To suggest a utopia for religious diversity in Canada, however, would be inaccurate. In the 1980's and 90's, Sikh men who wore the turban faced discrimination, and only through a series of court cases was their right to wear the turban cemented. Subsequently, today, Sikh men are able to freely practice their religion while serving in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Armed Forces, federal agencies, in Parliament, and in life in general. While discrimination may continue to exist, the law stands on the side of freedom for Sikh men. The history is now threatening to repeat itself with other religions. In 2011, Prime Minister Harper's government introduced a ban on the niqab, a veil worn by Muslim women, during Canadian citizenship oaths (*The Globe and Mail*). The ban unearthed the discomfort toward certain types of religious expression in public,

One source of conflict in the historical beginnings of Canada is the divide between the French and English. This conflict was resolved partly through official bilingualism. Canada's constitution says that both languages "have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of the Parliament and Government of Canada."³ While in Parliament Hill, the use of French and English appeared seamless, when I traveled to residential suburbs of Ottawa, I learned that not everyone speaks and masters both languages, and that this issue remains a source of tension for many Canadians. A Canadian friend living in Ottawa shared that some government jobs were less available to her because of her inability to speak French; therefore, she enrolled her daughters in bilingual schools to make sure that they will have equal opportunities. While

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sparking a series of debates and demonstrations both for and against the ban, and thrusting the question of religious freedom into the public spotlight. Ultimately, the law was challenged in court, and the Federal Court of Appeal overturned the ban (CBC News 2015). While Canadians may continue to face challenges with this issue, the written law continues to stand in favor of religious pluralism. Further, in this case and others, the judiciary acts independently, and sometimes in opposition to the parties under which they were appointed. I believe that the independent judiciary together with the strong Charter and legal codes will continue to uphold the law of religious pluralism.

HISTORICAL PLURALISM

Upon entering the House of Commons, I was surprised to be greeted by a wall to wall portrait of a standing Queen Elizabeth II. Canada is after all a Commonwealth country, together with 52 other countries. Sixteen, including Canada, are Commonwealth Realms, with the queen as head of state. The 53 commonwealth countries cover nearly one quarter of the world's land area including a population of 2.3 billion. Perhaps this historic and ceremonial connection with nearly one third of the world's population promotes some sense of pluralism.

The founding of Canada as a nation state may also have an implicit role in pluralism. Canada did not come into being through a revolution. The big day that Canadians commemorate, Canada Day, marks the date in which Canada came into being, July 1, 1867, through the British North America Act. Canada Day celebrates a statute, not an event. The sovereignty of the state evolved slowly, rather than resulting from a cataclysmic event. This slow evolution in parallel and in peace with the colonizers, rather than a war, seems to have resulted in a fundamentally different tone for national identity. Canadians did not have to fight to become Canadian. So the fighter-revolutionary notion of citizenry appears to be absent. In modern terms, the meaning of an evolution instead of revolution persists: A Canadian becomes Canadian simply by being. On a national level, Canadians do not appear to have the innate fear of attack, which seems inherent to its southern neighboring nation state that emerged out of war, and subsequently specified in the American Bill of Rights that "a well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed."²

it may take future generations to continue to smooth the ruffles for bilingualism, this history of honoring two languages seems to have paved the path for honoring multiple cultures. Prime minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau formally announced a policy of multiculturalism in the House of Commons in October 1971. He stated:

We believe that cultural pluralism is the very essence of Canadian identity. Every ethnic group has the right to preserve and develop its own culture and values within the Canadian context. To say that we have two official languages is not to say we have two official cultures, and no particular culture is more "official" than another. A policy of multiculturalism must be a policy for all Canadians. (Harney 1988, 69)

The establishment of a policy of multiculturalism replaced the policy of "bilingualism and biculturalism" with "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework" (Karim 2008). This historical declaration builds off a history of plurality.

SOCIAL PLURALISM

Throughout the study tour, pluralism appeared as a fabric of society. While the tone may be set by national charters and policies, it is the people who carry out these ideals. We were welcomed and found that society appeared to welcome indiscriminately to race, religion, sex, gender, and other cultural factors. One speaker explained this phenomenon of hospitality with a reference to the introduction of section 91 of Canada's Constitution Act, "peace, order, and good government," in contrast with America's, "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness." The opening lines of Canada's national charter highlight community wellbeing without making mention of individual values.

At the highest offices in Canada, wellbeing seems to be a cornerstone principle. The Governor General, who is the representative of Queen Elizabeth II in Canada, has led work to "connect, honor, and inspire Canadians." We had the honor of a roundtable discussion with governor general David Johnston to learn about his role, including formal duties and work on social issues. Among his various activities, he has been engaged in initiatives to "recognize excellence, valour, bravery, and exceptional achievements," essentially, celebrating community and the accomplishments of Canadians (The Governor General 2015).

Ultimately, it is the Canadian people who make communities welcoming. The notion of identity may promote hospitality among individuals. One can be Canadian, as pronounced in French or English, or in another language. Canadians seem to recognize that every individual, except those from First Nations, Aborigines, are immigrants. Subsequently, Canadians are encouraged to keep their ethnic identities and be Canadian. This embrace of multiple identities is akin to the salad bowl analogy, in which people from different places come together and share their customs, rather than blending in to attain a new identity, as in the melting pot. In the Canadian salad bowl, each small group maintains their unique cultural identities within the larger society.

One group that remains marginalized in Canada is Aboriginal peoples. We learned that First Nation communities in rural areas have faced problems such as inadequate access to food, water, education, and mobility. First Canadians living in cities also face persistent disadvantages in education, employment, health, and housing. Throughout our trip, government leaders and non-indigenous Canadians repeatedly acknowledged the need to grant First Canadians justice, not simply because they are the first ones, but because it would be the plural, the Canadian thing to do.

CONCLUSION

What is the value of pluralism? To answer would require rigorous research, analysis, and critical thinking in the depths of knowledge from physics to metaphysics. In the Quran, God says:

“O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct. Lo! God is All-knowing, All-aware.” (49:13)

If we truly lived to value all people in all of society's systems from the political to the economic, perhaps we would be much closer to the type of *peace, order, and good government* that would lead to an unyielding *life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness*. ■

NOTES

1. Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 2(a), Section 15(1)
2. The United States Constitution, Amendment II
3. Subsection 16(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982

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