

Canadian Bilingualism, Multiculturalism and Neo-Liberal Imperatives

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Canadian second language and immigration policies have often been held up as positive models for Americans on both the right and the left. In particular, both the “English Only” and the “English Plus” movements in the United States have claimed that French Immersion programming in Canada support their own positions (Crawford, 1992; King, 1997). However, in this piece I argue that Canadian immigration and language policies are closely intertwined and have been carefully calculated to subsume linguistic and cultural diversity under what Young (1987) once characterized as a form of “patriarchal Englishness against and under which... all others are subordinated” (pp.10-11). These policies have served neo-liberal economic imperatives and have helped perpetuate inequalities. In fact, I am of the opinion that they are not incompatible with empire building.

Bilingualism and Multiculturalism

Canada is a nation in which French is the first language for 22% of the total population of 36 million. English is the first language for 59%. The remaining 19% speak a third language as their mother tongue. The size of this third language grouping (the so-called Allophones) is due mainly to immigration (the highest rate in the G8 industrialized nations), self-reported visible minority status (19%) and the relatively high numbers of first nation peoples (4.5%). According to the last census, 17.5 % of the total population is now bilingual and 26.5% born outside of the country. It is a highly diverse population (all figures, Statistics Canada, 2016).

The twin pillars of Canadian official language and immigration policies are bilingualism and multiculturalism. English and French became the official languages of Canada with the passage of the Official Languages

Act in 1969. Federal legislation adopted multiculturalism as official state policy in 1971. These two policies have often been described as a stance of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework (Haque, 2012). The Prime Minister during this period of policy development, Pierre Trudeau, argued that bilingualism was essential for Canadian unity in the face of the threat of Quebec separatism. Government policy at the time further made clear that multiculturalism was a response to the discontent expressed by third language immigrant groups to bilingualism (Esses & Gardner, 1996).

Immigration Policy and Neo-Liberal Economics

Both bilingualism and multiculturalism have been closely connected to the perceived need for significant increases in immigration that would lead to population growth. In fact, the federal government recently announced an increase in immigration targets. The new targets would allow 450,000 newcomers to enter the country annually by the year 2021, a substantial increase over the current 250,000. In public pronouncements, government ministers explicitly state that the purpose of this policy is to deal with significant labor shortages, an aging population and a declining birth rate (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, October 30, 2016).

As Piketty (2013) notes, managing population growth is central to neo-liberal economics. Increased production, consumption and profit are tied to an ever-increasing population. In the Canadian context, selective immigration is a sure fire way of ensuring this. As a result, Canada has used a complex immigration screening process based in large part on perceived workforce needs and aggressive recruitment policies to ensure that the country has one of the highest intakes of newcomers in the world.

As Statistics Canada (2016) makes clear, immigrant labor costs less than that of native-born Canadians. Newcomers are often highly educated and skilled (thanks to schooling paid for by their source countries). They are more productive, more law-abiding and less prone to make use of social services. Most importantly, the average immigrant earns 80% of the wages

paid to Canadian-born workers. Therefore, while it might be true that accepting more refugees and immigrants is in many ways an act of charity, there is also profit in it.

The Parliament of Canada Standing Committee on Finance (2013) notes that while Canada may not have the same degree of income disparity as in many countries, the wage gaps between the rich and subaltern groups are still pronounced and have recently increased substantially. The richest income group (fifth quintile) now controls 39.2% of total national income. Women make up 47% of the workforce but make 26% less than men. People aged 20 to 24 years have seen a 41% decline in purchasing power since 1976 and 60% of First Nations children live in poverty. Immigrants are subject to double the unemployment rate.

So, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Fleming, 2007), there is little altruistic about Canadian multicultural and immigration policies despite the commonly held stereotype that represents Canada as a “nice” country with (a current set of) “nice” politicians (e.g. USA Today, October 18, 2016). I argue that these policies are ways of managing high levels of immigration in order to reap long-term economic and political benefits for upper income Canadians: the patriarchal English that Young (1984) talked about above. Haque and Patrick (2014), in fact, have documented how the upholding of standardized English language “norms” within these policies have reinforced a racialized hierarchy within the Canadian nation state (especially for first nations aboriginal peoples) and have served as important supports for neo-liberal economic agendas.

Second Language Immigration: A Brief History

Knowles (2000) provides a detailed historical account of Canadian language and immigration policies, much of which makes for upsetting reading. In the aftermath of European contact and the devastation of native populations, the number of people in the French-speaking colonies of what would become Canada grew to approximately 1700. Soon after the British

conquest of Quebec in 1759, however, large numbers of French-speaking Acadians were expelled from present-day Nova Scotia to Louisiana. Many of these exiles returned in large enough numbers to ensure the bilingual character of present-day New Brunswick, but not enough to turn the tide against successive waves of English-speaking immigration to what was now known as British North America. Not long after the American War of Independence, when those loyal to the British crown fled the United States, the English-speaking population became the majority of what would become Canada.

By 1900, the English-speaking majority made up 57% of the total Canadian population of 5,374,026. French speakers, both in and out of Quebec, amounted to 30%. Native peoples made up only 2.4% of the population. The remainder was principally immigrants from Central Europe recruited to populate the western prairies and those Chinese laborers (possibly up to 15,000) brought in to build the trans-continental railways.

In the 20th century, successive Canadian governments enacted policy that encouraged British immigration. Those from continental Europe were accepted for strategic reasons if those from the United Kingdom couldn't be found, particularly when the Canadian government moved to counteract American expansionism and Metis separatism in the west. These immigrants were often provided with significant land grants as incentives to immigrate.

On the other hand, Asian applicants were either explicitly excluded or subjected to prohibitive entry fees and regulations, even when holding British passports. The notorious "head tax" created a significant economic barrier to Asians who wished to enter the country or reunite their families. Other immigration procedures discouraged black applicants and made it nearly impossible for Jews fleeing war-torn Europe to enter the country. Even those racial minorities already in Canada faced serious forms of discrimination. Many racial groups were banned from practicing some

professions, living in certain neighborhoods or explicitly denied voting rights. Native peoples, to cite the worst example, only gained the federal franchise in 1960.

This sad history is littered with violence and the capricious exercise of power by government officials. A few of the worst examples demonstrate that Canadian history has not been the progress of sweetness and light that is often portrayed. In 1907, whites rampaged through Chinese and Japanese neighborhoods in Vancouver, threatening its residents and smashing storefronts. In 1914, the *Komogata Maru*, a ship containing 440 emigrants from India, was refused entry to British Columbia under various arbitrary pretexts even though it had adhered to the ridiculous regulations used at the time to prevent the entry of South Asians, even if they held British passports. Later in the century, most Canadians of Japanese descent had their possessions confiscated during the Second World War because they shared the same ethnicity as the enemy of the time.

French Instruction in Canadian Schools

The “rubber” of language and immigration policies in Canada “meets the road” through French Immersion programming. This is because the vast majority of Canadian Francophones are bilingual, the vast majority of Anglophones are monolingual and the vast majority of Allophones eventually learn English and not French. Thus, the policy imperative is to produce Anglophones and Allophones who are, to a greater or lesser extent, proficient in French. In view of this, the federal government has allocated significant financial resources to the development of French language programming in schools throughout English Canada.

There are four common ways in which French as a second language is taught in Canadian schools. The first is Core French (CF), in which French is taught as a separate subject in secondary schools. Students typically receive 600 hours of instruction over four years. The second is Extended French (EF), in which at least once course per year in secondary school is

taught in French. These are typically geography or history courses. The third option is Intensive French (IF), in which 600 hours of instruction in French are taught over a two-year period in a variety of subjects. The most substantial program, however, is the fourth option: French Immersion (FI). This involves teaching French through content starting in primary school (Early Immersion), secondary school (Late Immersion) or in post-secondary contexts. Depending on the jurisdiction, it is common for FI instruction to be more intensive at the earlier stages of programming than in the latter stages. Children enrolled in FI often have all of their instruction conducted in French (except for the one English language component) in the earlier grades. English is slowly introduced so that they are only taking one or two courses in French by the time they graduate from secondary school.

As Roy (2010) notes, despite the various ways in which this programming has been designed, Anglophone and Allophone students in Canadian schools rarely achieve full fluency in French. This has been a cause for concern and has led some scholars to come to the conclusion that the actual policy goal of FI is to simply make Anglophones and Allophones more sympathetic to the “French fact” of the Canadian nation state or to mollify Francophones who might still be sympathetic towards Quebec separatism (Haque, 2012). In the name of keeping the nation state intact, we have a bilingual nation in terms of policy, but not in terms of fact.

Conclusion

As I mentioned in my introduction, Canadian policies have often been held up as positive models. It is certain to my mind that Canadian language and immigration policies have much to recommend to Americans, especially given current US politics. To a large extent, these policies have resulted in a relatively stable multicultural society and a workable bilingual nation-state. As Knowles (2000) argued, the history of the “French fact” and our settler history have necessitated a government structure that has been forced to pay attention to minority issues and concerns.

The current Liberal Party government certainly plays this up rhetorically (if not in fact: many of the political promises of the last election are being “reconsidered” or even broken). However, even our Conservative Party politicians rarely challenge the twin pillars of bilingualism and multiculturalism or the need to integrate large numbers of immigrants. We have few parallels to politicians like Sarah Palin or Donald Trump.

However, I wish to stress that these Canadian policies make neo-liberal economic sense, especially for a country with a relatively small population and a vast geography. Growth is essential to a stable capitalist order, and a well-integrated diverse population can be (and has been in our case) structured in such a way as to support that order. Britain is no longer the empire to which Canada is tied. The economic decline of the United States is quite clear and the instability of China is more and more apparent. Increasingly, the barroom joke up here that Canada will form the next empire is increasingly becoming less ridiculous or humorous. As Beard (2015) noted, recognizing and accommodating the fact of multiculturalism and multilingualism was a significant factor in the longevity of the Roman Empire.

I myself work at a bilingual university (one of the world’s largest), which is relatively well funded, government supported and productive. The University of Ottawa’s marketing slogan (“Canada’s University”) is no mistake in view of the country’s official policy of bilingualism. However, I often hear the argument in faculty meetings that we shouldn’t take into account the needs of aboriginal or allophone groups because of our concentration on French and English. In short, official bilingualism comes at a price at our institution.

In conclusion, Americans should be cautious in using the Canadian example as a model for turning the United States into a bilingual English/Spanish nation-state. Given American history and emerging demographics, it will be important to break the hold privileged groups have

in perpetuating *defacto* monolingualism. However, in my estimation, Canadian bilingualism has been far from a “magic bullet” for subaltern groups.

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