

Michael Adams . We're no bigots

Don't confuse the defensive proclamations of an anxious minority with mainstream Canadian opinion about immigrants

Michael Adams, Ottawa Citizen Special

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'I have often regretted my speech, never my silence,' the Greek philosopher Xenocrates said. One wonders whether, when the Bouchard-Taylor commission on reasonable accommodation has aired the thoughts of every Quebecer who chooses to take the microphone, the province (and indeed the rest of Canada) will feel satisfaction or regret.

There is certainly a segment of the Canadian population that believes they have been silent for too long. These Canadians believe that their country has failed to proclaim its values, principles and demands to the quarter-million immigrants who arrive here each year. As a result, they think, newcomers with illiberal ideas and practices are cannily filling the vacuum. Wimpy Canadian tolerance has ceded the field to robust foreign zealotry.

No more, these agitated souls say. They will no longer be kept silent by the tyranny of political correctness. They will give voice to their long-simmering anger - and the real voice of Canada (and/or Quebec) will finally resound.

This is called a backlash, and there is no question that one is afoot in Canada. (It takes on a distinct character in Quebec but is by no means confined to that province.) The question is, how big is the backlash? Or, as the cover of a recent Maclean's magazine put it, "Are we becoming a nation of bigots?"

Environics polling finds that there has been a recent spasm of concern about the integration of newcomers into Canadian society. Between 2005 and 2006, the proportion of Canadians believing that "too many immigrants do not adopt Canadian values" jumped to 65 per cent from 58 per cent. This is not a trivial finding, but nor is it the whole story.

Canadian attitudes toward immigrants remain overwhelmingly positive, and when viewed in international perspective are truly exceptional. Canada has the highest immigration rate in the world, but when asked if this country accepts too many immigrants, most of us say no. And when Canadians are asked to name in their own words the biggest problem facing the country, diversity issues don't even make the list: We are much more worried about health care, the environment and economic issues.

Canadians are by far the most likely of any G8 country to say immigrants are good for the country, and that immigrants help the economy grow rather than "(take) jobs from other Canadians." Canadians are also the least likely of any western society to hold the misconception that immigrants commit more crime than "people born here." In naming

things that make them proud to be Canadian, more Canadians say multiculturalism than hockey or bilingualism.

On all these questions, Canadians have been growing increasingly open and welcoming over the past 15 to 20 years. And these flexible, accepting attitudes do not just pertain to newcomers. Look at how rapidly Canadians' attitudes toward gays and lesbians have evolved: In 1987, just one in 10 Canadians approved of homosexuality. By 2004, that number was almost half (48 per cent). But even among those who disapprove of homosexuality, a significant proportion say they believe gays and lesbians deserve equal rights. Today, seven in 10 Canadians say homosexuality should be accepted by society.

Defending the rights of a minority group of whom you may not personally approve? That's the hallmark of a tolerant society.

In other words, the broad trend in this country is toward openness and respect for minority groups, including those who arrive in Canada as immigrants. This is not to say that Canadians of various backgrounds are not experiencing some concern about the integration of newcomers into Canadian society. Canada has the highest immigration rate in the world and the second-highest foreign-born population. There are bound to be some challenges - and some charged debate about how to respond to those challenges.

But Canadians should not allow the squeaky wheels at the Bouchard-Taylor hearings or the edicts of the Hérouxville town council to loom too large in their perceptions of how diversity is working in this country. Instead of relying on the residents of Hérouxville, a rural community of 1,300 (whose residents, according to the census, are so diverse that they are 100 per cent French-speaking, 96 per cent Roman Catholic, and 0.7 per cent foreign-born) to tell us how things are going, why not listen to the residents of Canada's largest cities, cities which are among the most diverse urban centres on the planet?

Residents of Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal are invariably the most supportive of immigration and the most positive about the contributions immigrants make to Canadian society. These are the people living the experience of the diverse society, and they say it's working.

This is not to dismiss or deride people in rural Canada who are concerned about the changes wrought in their country by the most ambitious immigration program on Earth. It's their country, too, and they have a right to speak. But just as the alarmists among them should not mistake sensational media stories for the reality of daily life in Canada, the rest of us should not imagine that the defensive proclamations of an anxious minority (the backlash) represent mainstream public opinion.

Indeed, in the face of some of the heated rhetoric of the past year - not only at the Bouchard-Taylor hearings but on such issues as niqabs (Muslim head coverings) at the polls - cooler heads (covered and uncovered) are already beginning to call for reason and moderation. In other words, there is a backlash against the backlash. But this second backlash is not so much a backlash as it is the reassertion and rearticulation of open,

tolerant values that have been taking shape for the past half-century in this country, and which polls show Canadians under 30 take for granted.

These are not wishy-washy notions waiting around to be displaced by a more macho nationalism - or by any imported dogma. Canadian idealism has a spine. It is made of our laws, our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, an unwavering commitment to gender equality, and a belief that under conditions of fairness, dialogue and - yes - accommodation, people who are different from each other in some ways can share a harmonious, prosperous society. In such a society, people sometimes need to talk and sometimes listen. Almost two millennia after Xenocrates, most of us are still trying to figure out when to do each.

*Michael Adams is president of the Environics group of companies. His latest book, **Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism**, was released this month.*