

Surprise, Canadian pluralism is working

An exclusive excerpt from famed pollster's new book argues immigrants are neither failing nor being failed. We need to start looking past alarmist headlines

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It's been nearly a year since Earthlings everywhere were informed that if they wished to stone women, imprison girls, and ruin Christmas, they had better not try any of this in Herouville, Que. The town council put its foot down in the face of perceived threats from religious minorities, issuing an infamous declaration of ground rules, its "code of life."

The Herouville decree was ridiculed in some quarters as the expression of a small town's hysteria about issues of which it had little experience. Quebec Premier Jean Charest called the document an "isolated case." But others – both politicians and journalists – took the episode as important evidence that Canadians (particularly Quebecers) were growing increasingly anxious about the cultural integration of newcomers and minority groups.

Since then, two ideas have appeared consistently in the national media. The first is that Canadians are losing their vaunted openness to newcomers. The society that once wore multiculturalism as a badge of honour now sees riots in the suburbs of Paris, "homegrown terrorists" in the United Kingdom, and ethnic clashes on the beaches of Sydney and senses it has bitten off more than it can chew.

Some, like the Herouville town council, are deciding they had better toughen up and remind these outsiders who got here first and who makes the rules.

The second idea is that newcomers are not having such a great time becoming Canadian. Ethnic enclaves are proliferating, suggesting that our society is growing increasingly segregated. Immigrants' employment outcomes are getting worse: their incomes are lagging, they are being discriminated against, and even their kids don't feel Canadian. A consensus is emerging that Canada is growing less enthusiastic about newcomers and newcomers are not so thrilled about Canada either.

But before we start building our bunkers, let's take a closer look at all this bad news. First: Have Canadians become xenophobic overnight? Between 2005 and 2006, the proportion of Canadians believing that "too many immigrants do not adopt Canadian values" jumped from 58 per cent to 65 per cent. So, yes, public opinion polling has shown a spasm of concern about the integration of newcomers.

Canadian attitudes, however, remain overwhelmingly positive. Canada has the highest immigration rate in the world, but when asked if this country accepts too many

immigrants, most of us say no. 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 "taking 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.

Are Canadians experiencing some anxiety about the single most ambitious immigration program in the world? Yes. Is Canada giving up on diversity, becoming a hotbed of xenophobia overnight? No.

Second, are newcomers struggling – economically, socially, politically – and seething with disillusionment about Canada? Immigration is a tremendously difficult process and there is evidence that some parts of this process have gotten harder recently. There is also strong evidence that many newcomers face discrimination – from racism to non-recognition of valid paper qualifications. These are serious problems and I don't wish to diminish them.

But the idea that immigrants are failing (or being failed) is false. According to Statistics Canada, after four years in Canada, 84 per cent of immigrants say they would make the same decision again and come to Canada. Most immigrants say they are better off economically than before they came.

Reported financial improvement is worryingly low among economic class immigrants – the kinds of skilled people Canada needs badly – but even here, where just a third (35 per cent) say they are better off economically than before they immigrated, 84 per cent say their overall quality of life has improved.

With time in Canada, immigrant rates of volunteerism, charitable giving, engagement with current events and voting approach or exceed the national average.

Economic outcomes are the rub: Newcomers are slower to catch up to the national average than they once were – and this is especially true among people of colour. This is serious. But the incomes of second-generation Canadians – the children of immigrants – actually exceed the national average, suggesting that by and large people who come to this country seeking a better life for their children achieve that result.

As for those famous ethnic enclaves, Feng Hou of Statistics Canada finds that today's newcomers from China and South Asia are less residentially segregated than Italians and European Jews were when they were recent immigrant groups. Even multiculturalism skeptics concede that these latter groups are spectacular success stories of integration and community pride.

For some readers, there are two elephants sitting in the middle of this analysis: Muslims and Quebec.

People generally express two fears about Muslims in Canada: they are unwilling to integrate into secular society and they are sympathetic to terrorism. As for integration, an Environics poll of Canadian Muslims found this group to be much like other immigrant groups (Canada's Muslims are 90 per cent foreign-born).

Nine in 10 are proud to be Canadian, eight in 10 think the country is headed in the right direction and reasons cited for national pride are the same as in the population at large: freedom and democracy, peacefulness and the friendliness they perceive among their fellow Canadians (although three in 10 Canadian Muslims say they have experienced discrimination). As for terror, our survey found that Canadian Muslims overwhelmingly condemn it, and nearly nine in 10 say that ordinary law-abiding Muslims have a duty to report on any extremism they may be aware of in their own communities.

Lamentably, this doesn't mean that a terrorist attack in Canada is impossible – but terrorism is a complex criminal problem involving small groups of people and not a broad social movement rooted in any minority group's alienation from Canadian society.

On to Quebec. Concerns about growing xenophobia in Canada are writ large in La Belle Province. I believe the particular pitch of worry about newcomer integration in Quebec is rooted in two special qualities about that region.

First, there is Quebecers' long-standing anxiety about minority status. A francophone island in the Anglo ocean of North America, the sense of being outnumbered and clinging to just a small patch of territory where their own culture may thrive is hardly new.

But these days, the perceived threat is not only from the English-speaking hordes from Vancouver Island to Miami, it's from immigrants within Quebec. Second, it was only a generation ago that Quebecers renounced religion – with no small effort – through their Quiet Revolution. They have created a secular-liberal francophone utopia within their borders and are highly sensitive to any threat to that hard-won paradise – especially threats rooted in religion.

Quebec's anxiety about newcomers and minority groups, so extensively publicized during the recent hearings on "reasonable accommodation," contains echoes of similar anxiety in France and elsewhere in Europe. But, in the end, Quebec is part of a broader Canadian context of pluralism. This recently came through when Pauline Marois's heavy-handed immigrant integration legislation met with multi-party opposition.

To say that many things are going right in Canada is not to say that things are perfect. We need to keep talking about everything from racial discrimination to the meaning of citizenship to the relationship between religion and public life.

But while we need to pay close attention to the problems, we should work hard to gain a clear sense of the scale of those problems, the progress made to date and the social resources available to improve things. As it turns out, the social resources, in the form of Canadians' goodwill toward newcomers and newcomers' desire to participate fully in this society, are considerable.

This country – from the longest-resident WASP family to the people arriving at Pearson, Trudeau, and Vancouver International at this very minute – is doing a pretty good job at something no one has ever tried before. We need both the bad news and the good news to understand what is going on here and what is yet to be done. We should accept neither complacency nor defeatism as we continue to build this country, a work in progress that, if we're lucky, will never be complete.

Michael Adams is president of the Environics group of companies and author of Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism, released this week by Viking Canada.