

The role of immigration in shaping canadian national culture



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Canadian educator and philosopher of popular culture Marshall McLuhan coined the famous expression “ the medium is the message. ” Canada has become a medium to broadcast an urgent message to the whole wide world, which is a message of tolerance and understanding. This it delivers by the living example it sets of relative openness to welcome all the peoples of the world to live and work within its peaceful and prosperous society. McLuhan also was the first to use the now widely used phrase: the global village.

We live in a world that is increasingly becoming a global village. One of the greatest challenges facing every society of today is how to live in a culturally diverse world. Canada, being a predominantly multicultural, multi-ethnic society, a nation of immigrants that has had a long tradition as a country shaped by immigrants, can lead the way to a better future for the world, a future based on understanding, cooperation and coexistence between people of all nations. Canada is a vast territory, much larger than its continental neighbor to the south.

The history of Canada is one of immigration and the gradual filling up of empty spaces. Today, Canada constitutes 10 provinces and three territories, stretching from the Atlantic in the east to the Pacific Ocean in the west. In the north it extends up to the frozen lands of the Arctic circle. Though having come from different parts of the world, the people of these provinces and territories are united in the spirit of one nation (Cheng 31). Over the past century, millions of people hailing from all the various continents have made Canada their home.

Canada has a solid reputation of being a friendly welcoming country and a tradition of openness. In our present day, Canada has become one of the
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most sought after destinations for international immigrants, particularly from Asian countries. The reason for this is obvious: Canada is a thriving nation that ranks near at the top of United Nations' ' quality of living' index. On the other hand, Canada's stature in the twentieth century as a prosperous member of the international state system with a developed economy and skilled labor force is a largely attributable to immigration.

Canada has been built by successive waves of immigrants, and their contribution to the country is central to its identity and history. The annual influx of immigrants in Canada hovers around an average of 200, 000, and comprises of an impressive array of people from various national, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Individuals looking to be a part of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society can find Canada especially attractive. Among the top ten countries of origin for immigrants to Canada are China, India, the Philippines, Taiwan, S. Korea, Poland and Russia.

Canadian culture, as that of any society, is shaped by its population base. In Canada fully 16 to 18% of the population is foreign-born, compared to 2. 2% among the 12 EC countries, and 10% in the United States. The foreign-born in Canada are from diverse points of origin, not one or a few major groups as in Germany or France, for example. As a result there are few or no immigrant ghettos or inner city enclaves, and certainly no homogeneous ghettos, as have emerged in some European or American cities. In the recent decades, Canada has emerged as a country where cultural antagonisms tend diffuse more readily.

Considering the numbers and diversity, there is relatively little racial strife in Canada, though as in any other multicultural country there are some ongoing

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problems with interracial conflicts. On the whole, Canadians today are relatively open to immigrants and minority groups, compared to many other diverse or immigrant receiving societies and to Canada in the past. Europeans intent on establishing permanent settlements in what became Canada first reached this land at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Two European peoples, the French and the British, first at war and then sharing an uneasy constitutional arrangement, created a foundation for the later development of Canada. Having been founded by the British and the French, the country evolved two major cultural communities and has two official languages. French-English dualism has been the central element in Canadian historical development. Canada's population grew slowly in the first few centuries of its existence. Estimates suggest that at the time of the British conquest in 1763 the European population stood at approximately 60 thousand.

By the time of Confederation in 1867, the number had reached 3 million, composed primarily of British and French stock. As the twentieth century opened, the 1901 census put the Canadian population at barely 5 million. Canada arrived into the 20th century on a high note. Industrialization was in full swing, gold had been discovered in the Yukon, and Canadian resources — from wheat to lumber — were increasingly in demand. In addition, the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway had opened the floodgates to immigration.

The twentieth century began for Canada with exceptionally large immigration movements which continued until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. In Canada, these early years of the century were notable for vigorous

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immigration management and development under the remarkable Liberal minister, Clifford Sifton. Sifton initiated a policy of peopling “ Canada's empty prairies” through an aggressive recruitment of settlers and the importation of migrant labor to build the railroad and industrial infrastructure (Graubard 52).

It may be interesting to note here that because the United States developed earlier than Canada, immigration to the United States during the second half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries was primarily to the urban centers of burgeoning industrialization. Canada, however, was still expanding its agricultural frontier, so agrarian immigrants from Western Europe were sought and their destination was primarily the newly opened lands of western Canada.

These early years of the twentieth century also marked the period when the White Canada immigration policies were enshrined in the law, and when politicians and public strongly supported them. The unprecedented immigration that characterized the first decade of the twentieth century caused concern among the native-born over the integrity of Canada's cultural traditions. Some two and a half million immigrants came to Canada between 1896 and 1914. Of these, it is estimated that close to a million came from Britain; more than three quarters of a million came from the United States, and more than half a million came from continental Europe.

While the majority were English-speaking, there were considerable numbers from Germany, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Russia, Ukraine, Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Poland. It was the beginning of the diversification of Canada's population and the point of origin of her largest, present-day ethnic

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communities. The period after WWII brought another wave of economic expansion and immigration, especially from Europe. The 1950s were a time of unprecedented wealth, and the middle class mushroomed.

However, after the end of World War II, governments of major countries all over the world tended to assume much wider responsibilities as regards immigration. Refugees in large numbers gradually became an accepted fact of life for Canada, and refugee policy with its international obligations became an important part of immigration planning and management in Canada, as elsewhere. The deliberately discriminatory immigration policies involved in maintaining the image of a white Canada, implemented in one way or other for over half a century, were finally abandoned in 1962.

With immigration continuing to expand the mosaic of peoples who constituted urban Canada, in 1971 the federal government announced its support for a policy of multiculturalism, a policy that symbolically recognized the positive and enduring impact of past immigration on Canadian society. The new policy also put forward a pluralist model of nation-building (Anisef, Laniphier 45). International migration, race, and ethnicity have played essential formative and dynamic roles in the challenging project of nation-building in Canada.