

April 15, 1994 Harry J. Kits

## **DIVERSITY, AWARENESS & ACCEPTANCE: How we see each other**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to be here with you. I'm looking forward to good couple of days together at this conference in north-western B.C..

As I reviewed the incredible variety of workshops planned disposal for these two days, I struggled with what I could say that would be most helpful to conference participants.

You, too, may be wondering: what is this fellow from Toronto, (a huge multicultural city) across the country, going to say to us? What does he know about life in the northwest region of B.C.?

And he's a member of the so-called "elite" group in society -- a white, heterosexual, middle-class male. What can he tell us about multi-culturalism?

Not only that, but he's a practising Christian: what can he tell us about tolerance and acceptance of diversity?

Well, what can I say? I come to you not as an expert or scholar on issues of multiculturalism or racism, but as a person actively involved in issues of diversity in the world of politics. I work for Citizens for Public Justice, a Christian research and advocacy group which is involved in a variety of public policy issues. For over 30 years, CPJ has tried to persuade the government of its responsibility to give different groups in society room to pursue ways of life consistent with their fundamental beliefs and values.

CPJ has stood in solidarity with Aboriginal peoples in their struggle for land rights and self-government, for the past 20 years. For example, we actively supported the Ingenika and Mesilinka people in northern B.C. in their struggle for a new community years after their homeland was flooded by the WAC Bennett Dam. There may be some debate among conference participants on the land rights question.

At the same time, and for similar reasons, we have argued for the validity of parents (Aboriginal, Muslim, Sikh, Christian) choosing to send their children to alternative schools, programs or courses which more clearly reflect their values or religion, or their different pedagogical approaches, and that such schools and programs should be publicly funded. I recognize that here, too, there may be some disagreement in the room.

CPJ has engaged in this work based on a vision for this country which recognizes both the reality of fundamental diversity and the importance of individual rights and equality of opportunity. While protecting individual rights and opposing racism, we also promote a policy framework where differences are respected, accommodated and even enabled to flourish.

These are some of the issues I would like to touch on in this speech:

-What are pluralism and diversity?

-How do we experience diversity?

-How can we become more accepting, respectful and tolerant of both our own and other communities and persons in Canada?

I hope that you will be able to wrestle with some of these ideas in a more concrete and specific way in the workshops that will follow this speech.

## DIVERSITY IN CANADA

Canada has always been multicultural, with diverse peoples enjoying its beauty, fruits and opportunities. From time immemorial aboriginal peoples of various nations have lived here. The immigration of people from other lands and continents over the past centuries has added even more to its diversity.

For the last couple of centuries, however, the English-Canadian and French-Canadian cultures have dominated in their respective parts of the country. English and French schools, businesses, cultural activities, governments and churches have all put a powerful stamp on Canadian society.

Various frictions between the dominating English and French cultures --and between them and the minority cultures -- have also been evident throughout the history of Canada.

Only in the last quarter century or so have we begun to see serious efforts to acknowledge, at least in law and government, the reality of multiculturalism in Canada.

Former prime minister Pierre Trudeau instituted a policy of official multiculturalism in 1971, with a federal office and various national councils to express it. Multiculturalism was entrenched as a fundamental aspect of Canadian society in the Constitution Act of 1982. Brian Mulroney set up full-fledged Department of Multiculturalism with its own minister.

Well, this sounds promising. But what is actually happening in Canada today? It seems that all is not well:

Andrew Cardozo recently wrote in *Canadian Forum*:

If the early promoters of multiculturalism thought it would be a nice, easy ideal to implement, they were wrong.

Multiculturalism has turned out to be one of the most complex policies ever instituted, with a lot of potential and a lot of minefields.<sup>1</sup>

Max Yalden, the Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission, calls our situation the "conundrum of diversity versus a common sense of social cohesion."<sup>2</sup>

Listen to some of the stories making the news these days, highlighting the complexity:

There is currently a great deal of controversy about a conference being held in Vancouver in early July, entitled "Writing Thru Race: A Conference for First Nations Writers and Writers of Colour." This is a conference for non-white writers only, financed by the government and sponsored by a committee of the Writers' Union of Canada. Several well-known writers, including Robert Fulford, were angry about this "racially exclusive" conference. A *Globe* editorial expressed "revulsion" but sees it as completely within the policy of multiculturalism which is "intended to nourish and sustain the differences that come with open immigration."<sup>3</sup>

One letter to the *Globe's* editor said that the writers union, in limiting participation to non-white writers, was abandoning "the liberal principle of a colour-blind society."<sup>4</sup>

So, that seems to be one description of how to approach these issues. We are to be colour-blind, or race-blind, or culture-blind. But think about it -- is that what being multicultural, pluralist, anti-racist is all about? Or is it perfectly appropriate for people of colour in a multi-cultural society to caucus together to focus on their common experience as Native writers or writers of

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Cardozo, "On Guard for Multiculturalism", *Canadian Forum*, April 1994, p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Human Rights Commission, *Annual Report 1993*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, April 9, 1994. See also daily March 29, 1994 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, April 9, 1994.

colour?

Another story: The District of North Vancouver council decided to oppose official multiculturalism. Partly because members of the Iranian community were asking for provision of separate-sex swimming facilities at the local pool and emergency 911 services in their language. A letter to the editor of the *Globe* asserts that, "clearly, their interpretation [of multiculturalism] dictates that every whim of ethnic interest groups is to be catered to without regard either for fiscal responsibility or for common sense."<sup>5</sup>

Is this another approach -- to cater to every "whim" of ethnic interest groups?

In my own city, late one evening last year two women were getting on an elevator in an apartment building. Ethel, a white senior citizen and long-time resident of the building, was returning from a walk with her poodle. Amena, a recent refugee from Somalia, told Ethel to stay off the elevator because dogs are profane in her religion: it would be an insult to her dignity to ride in an elevator with a dog.<sup>6</sup>

The recent shooting in a restaurant in Toronto has created a "sharp escalation in the level of suspicion that young black males live with on a daily basis." As one young black man said "They are going to generalize about the whole group. It comes down to all of us being labelled deviant." The resentment of black youths, however, goes two ways -- to the society which labels them and to those few other black youths who supposedly prove the point of a prejudiced society by committing violent crimes.<sup>7</sup>

In Toronto there are also some parents and educators exploring the idea of black-focus schools. As one teacher put it, "the sea of under-achieving [black] youngsters is a problem... I see too many youngsters set adrift. It breeds alienation and disenfranchisement." They want to see the "creation of schools aimed mostly at black students, supported by a modified curriculum, minority teachers and strong links to the community."<sup>8</sup> Similar discussions occurred at the round table on education of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. And, of course, you experience some of that right here with independent Christian schools in your community.

I am sure you also have heard the myths being told in Smithers, often with disdain, about so and so in Moricetown who got a brand new logging truck from the government and now its just sitting there doing nothing. I now hear that story from kids of adults who told the same story to me six years ago when I first visited Smithers.

And one more Toronto story: the Nellie's controversy. The Nellie's organization was set up in a well-meaning way to assist battered women in Toronto. It was later seen by those it assisted as racist and patronizing. Women of colour were concerned that, even in a very progressive organization, power was still in a white woman's (June Callwood's) hands.

These are some of the complexities of diversity which we see before us today.

## **PERSPECTIVES ON DIVERSITY**

Complex though the issue is, in general, it can be argued the idea of multiculturalism has created a more positive climate and attitude towards cultural diversity than in most other societies. Canada is in many ways a leader among nations in this field.

What is multiculturalism policy in Canada? The objectives of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* include the following:

---

<sup>5</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, April 5 and 9, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Cardozo, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, April 9, 1994, p. A6.

<sup>8</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, April 7, 1994, "Guide to Education", page C4.

- fostering awareness and understanding of the cultural diversity of Canadian society;
- promoting understanding among Canadians of different backgrounds;
- raising awareness of, and working to eliminate racism and racial discrimination;
- assisting institutions to become more accessible and responsive to all Canadians;
- encouraging the full participation of ethnocultural communities; and
- overcoming problems of long-term integration faced by first-generation Canadians.

While at first multicultural groups emphasized cultural activities such as song, food and dance, they are now also emphasizing equal opportunities, human rights, and structural involvement in mainstream organizations. This is where the issues become more difficult.

Dealing with the issues of multiculturalism brings forward some deep fears.

- For example, in this time of economic uncertainty, many Canadians perceive that jobs, *our* jobs, are being taken by immigrants, and they are driving down wage levels.

- When the threat of crime makes us insecure and frightened, we blame immigrants.

- This suspicion and fear resides just as much in people who are themselves immigrants or children of immigrants.

- Or when fish stocks on which the livelihood of some of us depends seem to be depleted, we either blame aboriginal people or the commercial fishery, depending who we ourselves are.

- This suspicion from mainstream groups leads also to increased tension between minority groups themselves, especially in urban areas, compounding the cycle of accusations.

Again, in *Canadian Forum* Cardozo writes

Today multiculturalism is not just a policy under attack, it's a policy in crisis -- largely because we have lost the collective definition of what it was supposed to be. Yet we can hardly do without it.

Is multiculturalism about sharing cultures or stamping out everything Western and Anglo-Saxon? Is it about equality for all or is it about conquering the white male? Is it about special privileges for minorities or is it about creating the illusive level playing field?

A policy that was long considered to be a sign of generosity and tolerance is now being painted by its critics as the recipe for armageddon in Canada.<sup>9</sup>

The crisis in multiculturalism policy is related to a whole range of other policy issues: race relations policies, immigration, refugees, employment equity, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and human rights commissions.

## WHY MULTICULTURALISM ISN'T ENOUGH

Let's get a little deeper into the topic. When we talk about multiculturalism, what we are talking about is diversity. This is a given: Canada is a nation of diversity.

Canada is made up of many different tribes, races, languages, ethnic groups and nations. But these distinctions are not simple. The diversity we have is very complex. Different groupings criss-cross each other. For example, among the Aboriginal nations of Canada we find a variety of languages, faiths, and aspirations in life. Similarly, within, say, the black population, there are strong Muslim populations and strong evangelical Christian populations; some are rooted in an American consciousness, some in a Caribbean consciousness, and many in an African consciousness.

So how are Canadians responding to this great diversity? The dominant response has been shaped by *philosophic liberalism*. This liberalism, which many Canadians accept as truth (or *the only* way), has a huge influence on how we live as a nation with

---

<sup>9</sup> Cardozo, p. 14.

our diversity. I would like to take a few moments to describe it for you.

At heart, the vision of liberalism assumes that people can be defined by their individuality and freedom, that is, that people are first of all *free rational individuals*. Consequently, culture, religion, race and language are merely *secondary* and private qualities. They are irrelevant to the way we interact in the public square. The basic building block of society, it is argued, is the individual person, stripped of cultural, linguistic and religious differences.

This framework of liberalism has produced both positive and negative results.

First the positive: Liberalism prevents discrimination; it emphasizes the need to maximize individual freedom and rational choice without discrimination based on race, religion, etc. No one should be treated "with regard to their difference" or else citizens will be treated unequally. This is the core of the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In order to eliminate racism we *must* treat people without regard to their differences.

Liberalism has also been positive in that it encourages more public visibility of individuals from racial minorities (e.g. advertising, news reporting).

It also promotes support for groups that are considered "disadvantaged," and encourages action to help ameliorate conditions of disadvantaged groups or individuals. Non-discrimination with regard to race, religion, language and so on is clearly a positive result and needs to be upheld. Many of the workshops at this conference will be addressing this aspect of dealing with our differences.

However, there are also negative aspects to liberalism:

Liberalism does not sufficiently recognize the depth and importance of religion, culture, race, or language for personal and social life. It assumes that such differences are not important and can therefore be ignored. In fact, it could be argued that it is racist in this regard -- by not acknowledging difference when appropriate and requested.

Therefore, groups that *do* consider culture, religion and language as primary in their lives are given only two choices: assimilate -- that is, become part of the dominant, liberal culture, where culture, faith and language are not important; or isolate themselves, away from the rest of society.

Liberalism is incapable of accommodating the fundamental differences between groups of people in society when they choose to act out of their differences.

This was particularly evident during Canadian debates about the Constitution and the Charlottetown agreement. By granting "distinct society" status to Quebec and acknowledging the prior and inherent right of Aboriginal peoples to govern themselves, the agreement broke with the dominant vision of liberalism.

Proponents of liberalism such as Pierre Trudeau, Preston Manning, Deborah Coyne and Mel Smith (who urged a NO vote on Charlottetown) saw their vision of Canada being undermined by the agreement. Recognition of collective or group rights, they said, would erode individual freedom. *Different* treatment (of Aboriginal peoples or of Quebec), they argued, is actually *special* or "*more-equal*" treatment. Writing such provisions into the Constitution, they warned, would result in the dismembering of Canada and the establishment of "groupism."

This vision was perhaps best articulated by Mel Smith, former constitutional advisor to the B.C. government, in his call for "one nation, indivisible, sharing a diverse past with pride, but facing a common future together, uncluttered by factional, class, ethnic or linguistic differences."<sup>10</sup>

Liberalism remains the dominant framework in our society. It continues to hamper our efforts at dealing with diversity in Canada. It continues to lead to some of the tensions I outlined earlier.

---

<sup>10</sup> *BC Report*, Sept. 28, 1992.

For we cannot ignore the fact of difference in Canada. Some very fundamental differences exist today, and they will not go away just because we could not reach a constitutional deal. Canada is made up of a variety of groups which have chosen to act and live out their differences -- nations, faith groups, language groups, and others. Failure to respect and appropriately protect such diversity will result in serious grievance and will escalate the kind of divisiveness which we experienced in the constitutional discussions and the stories I described. At the same time, where appropriate, non-discrimination is essential if people choose to seek opportunity without regard to their race, culture, language or faith.

## MUTUAL RESPECT

The core of what is needed is not the integration of minorities into the majority, or the isolation of minorities from the mainstream of society, both of which happen under liberalism, but the creation of space in society to allow different people and groups to participate in society on the basis of their own identity, should they so wish. The chauvinism of the mainstream must give way to *tolerance* and *respect for diversity*.

Tolerance, in my definition, is the acceptance of things we do not like. Tolerance does not mean giving up all disagreements or differences or expressions of opinion. (Here is where political correctness has gone overboard.) Tolerance does not assume agreement with every belief or way of life. But it assumes that even though we may not like or agree with some approaches to life, respect for diversity demands that we allow them to exist around us and beside us.

But, respect, mutual respect is the attitude which creates a context for tolerance of diversity and even serious disagreement to exist.

Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic put it beautifully awhile back:

If the world today is not to become hopelessly enmeshed in ever more terrifying conflicts, it has only one possibility: It must deliberately breathe the spirit of multicultural co-existence into the civilization that envelopes it. There is no need at all for different peoples, religions and cultures, to adapt to one another. It is enough if they accept each other as legitimate and equal partners. They need not even understand each other. It is enough if they respect each other, if they respect and honour each other's differences. In any case, if mutual understanding is ever to come about anywhere, it can only happen on the terrain of mutual respect.<sup>11</sup>

This does not mean that "anything goes." The bottom line is tolerance and mutual respect -- groups which promote hatred, racism, or intolerance should not be accepted.

In order to develop this atmosphere of respect, the very first thing we need to do is to honestly examine our own attitudes.

Let me suggest a few situations in which some of us may not immediately feel "respect" is coming into play:

How do I respond, on a trip to Vancouver, when a group of young black men are coming down the sidewalk towards me on a dark evening?

How do I respond when the local food bank requests rice for recent Vietnamese immigrants when I have been donating potatoes and pasta?

Why do some of us wonder if the oriental store owner speaks English even though he is third or fourth generation Canadian?

What do we think of those folk who decided to set up their own schools and call them Christian schools?

What will we do when Sikh parents want to bring a community leader in to the school at lunch-time to teach the Sikh kids

---

<sup>11</sup> From speeches delivered by Vaclav Havel in February, 1994, to audiences in Bangkok and New Delhi. Translated from the Czech by Paul Wilson.

about their religion, and then the Aboriginal students ask for an elder to do the same, and the Anglican Christians then want to ask the local priest to come in as well?

How do we respond when a Sikh student does not do well on a math exam? Is it intelligence we subtly question?

How does respect play out for the two women entering the elevator in Toronto, which I mentioned earlier?

What do I think of the Aboriginal employee who has an alcohol problem?

Or the Dutch Reformed employee who has an alcohol problem? Or the Sikh employee? Do I respond differently to each?

And what about those fishing licences that some people have to buy and not others?

Dealing with diversity in Canada today in a respectful way and right in our own lives here in northwest B.C. is no easy task. It is very complex and requires that we work on strengthening our own attitudes of respect.

Governments and constitutions can create conditions where values of tolerance and mutual respect can flourish, but we all need to change our own attitudes first. Our personal and communal attitudes towards "the other" need to be respectful, or to use more religious language, need to reflect our love for our neighbours. We need to practise mutual respect in our relationships with neighbours who are Hindu or Sikh, and in our response to Quebeckers and Aboriginal people who fear the loss of their cultures, languages or spiritual life and who are seeking to strengthen them politically and economically.

Instead of denying the place of religious beliefs by eliminating Christmas decorations in our public places, we need to celebrate more religious events *together and publicly*.

Instead of creating situations where religion, culture, or language-based hospitals, social service agencies, schools and other institutions are forced to become blandly like all others in the name of accessibility, we need to support a diversity of such institutions.

How can *mutual respect* help us find ways of settling the land rights claims in this part of the country, settling the conflicts between Aboriginal nations, and between Aboriginal nations and other communities now existing here?

In all of this, it is clear that the key call for change has to come to those who are still dominating society -- whites of European descent -- like myself. We may not feel we have any power, but that is because, in general, we are comfortable in this society and have few barriers. But we need to change, we need to tolerate, we need to respect -- we need to take the first steps to open up the space for our neighbours to be able to take the step of respecting us.

## **TAKING HEALING STEPS**

There are several things that stand in our way when we begin to face these issues and attempt to make changes.

1. we may be comfortable with our own lives and unwilling to be disturbed
2. we may feel sorry for injustices faced by others, but these feelings are short-circuited by other beliefs or lack of understanding (e.g. I'm sorry those Aboriginal people feel discriminated against or unfairly treated, but really if they'd only work a little harder....)
3. we fear that the solutions will be too expensive (who's going to pay for this or that program) or unfair to us (what? He's getting the job just because he's black/Sikh/...)
4. we feel powerless - it all seems too complex and there are no good solutions

We need change at both the structural and personal/local level. In order for structural change to happen we need to have personal change: that is, change in our attitudes. We must also do more than criticize. We must suggest positive alternatives that will lead to racial justice, mutual respect and reconciliation in our society.

By ourselves we cannot easily bring change, but in our schools, churches, community organizations, workplaces, neighbourhoods and families we can bring change. Not all of us can be community activists, but all of us can examine and change our attitudes and how we deal with others.

You will spend more time on concrete steps in the conference workshops -- but let me suggest nine specific things all of us can do:

1. Learn to listen-- find opportunities to build personal relationships: stereotypes and racism flourish in the absence of personal relationships
2. Appreciate and feel confident in your own community -- don't begin by fearing its change or possible demise -- then, with humility and respect, meet others
3. Be alert for stereotypes and racist comments, then unmask them wherever you find them, (eg. in entertainment, textbooks). Reinterpret misinformation coming to your children, colleagues, or students
4. Be honest about your own role as an oppressor -- either individually or as a silent part of a culture that oppresses -- and accept responsibility for this.
5. Reframe the issues. Work with others to challenge media images of the important issues and problems in Canada today, including multiculturalism and racism. Approach these issues in a way that uncovers the path towards justice for all, not just for a favoured few.
6. Take healing steps. Be satisfied when you achieve small steps of justice. As a colleague has said, "Get what justice you can today, and go back for more tomorrow."
7. Create room for change. Keep talking to neighbours and colleagues about issues of justice and diversity. These conversations are the seeds of new attitudes and approaches which make it easier for politicians to make positive legislative change.
8. Step fearlessly into the lion's den. Even those on the "other side" can prove to be valuable allies in seeking justice. Develop partnerships with others to try to come up with mutually acceptable healing steps. It is often surprisingly effective to step into the cage to work with the "lions," rather than poking at them from a safe distance.
9. Engage in local initiatives. There is still lots of room at the local level for doing good and seeking justice for all. In the face of impersonal global forces that appear to dominate us, small and local initiatives will give us hope. Right at home we can begin to work anew to care for people and the environment, to create a society of tolerance and mutual respect. Then we can be aware of diversity and learn accept and enjoy it.

If we ourselves are committed to justice in our everyday activities, then the attitudes of society can begin to change. Each of us, wherever we are, can witness to another way of approaching the problems of our day. In this way, we as individuals and communities take our own responsibility for what happens to ourselves and to those around us.

Let me close with a few words from Chief Gary Potts of the Teme-Augama Anishnabe in Northern Ontario:

I remember once coming across an old white pine that had fallen in the forest. In its decayed roots a young birch and a young black spruce were growing, healthy and strong. The pine was returning to the earth, and two totally different species were growing out of the common earth that was forming. And none was offended in the least by the presence of the others because their own identities were intact.

When you walk in a forest you see many forms of life, all living together. They each have their own integrity and the capability to be different and proud. I believe there is a future for native and non-native people to work together because of the fundamental fact that we share the same future with the land that we live on. ...

In a spirit of understanding, we will find ways to grow together from the earth, like the birch and the spruce trees.

May we seek to live together in that spirit.



Thank you.

-----  
**NOTES:**