

China &  
Canada

# EXCHANGE

## HONG KONG



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on the Canadian Mosaic

**Cirque du Soleil**  
a Canadian entertainment  
brand takes up position  
in Asia

**ENTREPRENEURS**  
How I Started, How I Made It

**Striking Gold  
in China**

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Canada, everyone says, is a country of immigration, and the reality of immigration to Canada in the vast majority of cases is assimilation.

## The Canadian Mosaic Revisited

By Dr. Tom Flanagan

*Dr. Flanagan, widely known as the architect of the Conservatives' political victory in Canada, is professor of political science at the University of Calgary. He gained recognition for his controversial views on First Nations politics, namely, his classification of aboriginals as Canada's first immigrants, which threw a wrench into the issue of aboriginal land claims settlements. Ever undaunted by political correctness, the former adviser to Prime Minister Harper here discusses the public policy of multiculturalism in Canada, specifically in its relationship to immigration. This article is based on a speech Dr. Flanagan gave recently at a Canadian forum on multiculturalism, in a session entitled "Taboo Topics". Taboo indeed...*



“Multiculturalism” is a word that means many things to many people in different situations. In this article, I will address multiculturalism as a public policy in Canada, in the context of its connection to immigration.

Canada, everyone says, is a country of immigration, and the reality of immigration to Canada in the vast majority of cases is assimilation – not through the dictate of government, but through the attractive openness of a free society. Consider the following features of Canadian society which structure the choices that immigrants face:

- English and French are official languages, and you have to learn one of them if you expect to get on with your life. Government programs and subsidies encourage learning the official languages. Immigrants realize the importance of this for themselves and even more for their children. Young people growing up in Canada, though they may learn their ancestral language to some degree, typically grow up with English or French as their only fully functional language.
- Publicly funded schools teaching a Canadian curriculum in English or French are wide open to immigrants. Those who want to are perfectly free to arrange an education for their children in their ancestral language and culture, but very few seem to want that option, or could afford the effort and expense even if they did want it.
- North American popular culture saturates Canadian life. Long-distance telephone, the internet and satellite TV may help immigrants keep in touch with their homelands, but their children will grow up listening to North American popular music, going to Hollywood movies, watching American and Canadian TV channels and reading Canadian newspapers.
- Immigrants can reside wherever they can afford to rent or buy. There is a lot of residential congregation, but no residential segregation in Canada. In a process that has been going on for centuries, new Canadians may establish ethnic neighborhoods, but their children typically move away.

- Similarly, there is no segregation in the job market; immigrants are free to apply for any jobs for which they are qualified. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and various human rights statutes make it illegal for employers to discriminate against them on grounds unrelated to workplace performance.

- Inter-marriage with people of other ethnic groups is completely legal and becomes increasingly common the longer immigrants are in Canada.

- Citizenship is easy to obtain. It requires only three years of residence in Canada plus basic knowledge of English or French, and passing a simple exam on information about Canada.

- All political parties covet the support of new Canadians. Parties may have different policies on immigration, but it is inconceivable that the leader of any Canadian party would echo the recent comments of Italy's Prime Minister Berlusconi about “evil immigrants”. Immigrants and their children who wish to participate in politics will find many opportunities to volunteer in political campaigns and even run for office themselves.

Becoming Canadian is like crashing an open door. Of course, time is required. Some people who come to Canada as mature adults may never fully assimilate, but their children probably will. I see the results of assimilation every day at the University of Calgary. My classes are filled with students of Chinese, South Asian, African and Latin American origin. They all read the same books, listen to the same music, watch the same TV and music, eat the same foods and wear the same clothes. If I were blind, I would have no idea of the background of the students I talk to. In most cases, neither their manner of speaking nor the content of what they say suggests the presence of cultural differences.

On top of these highly efficient assimilative social processes, we have erected an official multiculturalism policy. It was first proclaimed in 1971, inserted into the constitution in 1982, given its own legislation and department in 1988 and is now

leading a somewhat less conspicuous life as a program within the Department of Canadian Heritage. The multiculturalism program consists chiefly of grants to projects including research on ethnic communities, cultural performances and festivals, anti-racism campaigns and a wide range of efforts designed to encourage integration into Canadian life. Of the latter, my favourite is a project whose title I found on the Department's website: "The Unloading Zone: Anger Management for Vietnamese and Latin American Youth". (I hope the project managers get the boys to check their hardware at the door before they bring them together for consciousness-raising sessions.)

**A**s a simple man whose tastes run to professional sports, fishing and country music, I have some reservations about government spending taxpayers' money on culture. But as long as public money is being used to provide my wife with free classical music on the CBC and subsidized opera tickets, I find it hard to complain about government also spending a little bit on folk arts from other countries.

Rather, the point I want to make is that the scale of spending in the federal multiculturalism program is minuscule in comparison to all the gigantic assimilative processes taking place every day in education, employment, housing and politics. Official multiculturalism is a very thin veneer over the reality of assimilation in Canadian society.

**O**f course, assimilation is not complete and instantaneous. It takes two or even three generations to do its work, so that at any given time millions of people are in transition, keeping alive some ancestral practices while their children and grandchildren complete the transition to Canadian life. But I believe the pace of assimilation is picking up as a result of modern developments in transportation and information technology. Some immigrant groups who came to Canada in the 19th and early 20th centuries settled in rural areas where they kept largely to themselves and assimilation proceeded slowly. For example, Premier Ed Stelmach of Alberta was the grandson of Ukrainian immigrants who homesteaded in rural Alberta; yet he reportedly did not start to learn English until he was six years old. Today, with immigrants settling almost entirely in urban areas, that scenario would be very unlikely. The new Canadians I encounter at the university speaking perfect English are usually the children of immigrants, not the grandchildren.

## Assimilation in action

On the need for immigrants to Canada to adapt to local life:

*"Most were successful where they came from, but they need to leave the past behind. We advise them to mingle with locals, start reading English newspapers instead of Chinese newspapers, learn a sporting event and be a Canadian. They have to adjust their lifestyle before they can be very happy."*

Hong Kong businessman Calvin Mak, CEO of the Rhombus Group, quoted in *The Vancouver Sun*, August 10, 1994

**A**lso, there are some scattered groups that for religious reasons do not fit the general pattern. Canada contains Hutterite colonies with their communal way of life, Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints practising polygamy, observant Sikhs wanting to ride motorcycles while wearing a turban rather than a helmet and Hasidic Jews objecting to the visual pollution of women in swimming pools. Some of these problems are deadly serious, some are more comic than anything else, but they can be dealt with at the margins of Canadian democracy. It is one of the glories of a free society that, as long as they are willing to obey the law, small groups can band together in pursuit of very different ways of life. But that does not make Canada multicultural in any meaningful sense.

**D**oes the veneer of official multiculturalism do any good? Yes. To the extent that the money that is spent makes immigrants feel more accepted in Canada and encourages them to identify as Canadians and adopt Canadian values and customs, it provides a kind of cover for assimilation.

**D**oes it do any harm? Perhaps, in two ways. At one extreme, it provides a convenient defence for small minorities in conflict with Canadian law. For example, the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints of Bountiful, BC, appeal to multiculturalism as well as religious freedom to justify their practice of polygamy. At the other extreme, it encourages people to imagine that Canada is being balkanized into a checkerboard of mutually uncomprehending ethnic groups jealously guarding their ancestral cultures. That would indeed be scary if it were true, but it's not true in Canada.

**I**n short, multiculturalism is both a manner of speaking and a modestly funded set of public policies in Canada. It partially disguises the underlying reality of social assimilation, which in fact is proceeding more rapidly than ever. If it makes assimilation easier to accept, that's a good thing, for democracy works most easily when citizens participate in a common culture. Canada struggles at times to accommodate our two official languages, which do bring genuinely different cultures in their wake. I doubt we could exist at all as a democratic polity if all the languages and cultures of the world were setting up shop here. But assimilation prevents that, so we continue to get along as a multiracial, multiethnic society in which almost everyone shares, or is in the process of adopting, a common culture. ❁