

Boring Canadians

by Robert Bruce (August 2017)



Navigating the minefield of potential faux pas with sensitive Canadians is a grueling business at the best of times. In British universities, where their most sensitive exports herd in considerable numbers, many nurse their wounded *amour propre* with an imperial humourlessness rarely matched even by the Germans. Doubtless, like most global problems, they can be laid at the door of Americans. When you think your provincial cosmopolis is the Athens of the North, it must be a wounding sleight to be asked if it has any good trout holes. But, even this insult paled beside the etiquette blunder I made at my first test; I missed the tell-tale funny pronunciations and asked whereabouts in the Great Satan my short-lived friend was from. From then on, not a lot to be done apart from break off and move on to the next person I would never say hello to by the second week. These are perhaps small trials in the great combat of life but suffering is not a competition and I felt badly enough to exercise more care.

Weeks passed—I did just fine—and then the *annis horribilis* with a 28 year old PhD student from Toronto whose dissertation thesis was “First Nation Culture in an age of Cultural Imperialism.” I said Eskimo—she said lots more. After that, I just lay down with the inner bigot and stopped trying. I doubtless had a bad run, and I have never allowed my class prejudices to colour my judgement of the country. Of stupid Canadians, Ice hockey fights and Mark Steyn, I cannot speak highly enough but, of their lumpenintelligentsia and all its bovine subMarxist trendiness, it is impossible to be too offensive about and, lest it be overlooked, there are plenty of them. C.B Macpherson, Marshal McLuhan, James Endicott, Gerald Cohen—these are no walk-on extras. If some were too orthodoxly Marxist to be trendy (the revolting Christian communist Endicott reproached the Tiananmen square protestors for ‘plotting a capitalist restoration’), later products such as Michael Ignatieff and Naomi Klein have risen to the challenge with élan. Nations which nudge up against a colossus are particularly prone to exaggerate them and it is the misfortune of Canadians that America set a good standard to deviate from. In the US E Pluribus Unum, standards have been losing traction for a while; in Canada it has been fascism for decades and this pronounced aversion to Western exceptionalism feeds off a very Canadian neurosis.

Europeans are conscience-stricken Canadians (having convinced themselves that their very existence is a sin) who have adopted public penitence as a national religion (to judge by the latest Trudeau instalment there is no limit to what one can apologise for). Among its most sensitive prophets, the pose of “citizen of the world” has reached absurd heights of self-parody. Asked on what the country meant to him as an aspirant Canadian premier returning after a lifetime living abroad, Ignatieff responded that his recent book on Canada had “deepened my attachment to the place on Earth that, if I needed one, I would call home.” Even amongst angsty Canaks this was pushing it but, when you have the multicultural salad

bowl as your founding myth, these are canaries in the mine you shouldn't overlook.

Like many faithful milestones in the culture war, multiculturalism probably began as a miscalculation. While Trudeau Sr mouthed his platitudes about it, he was probably driven by the admirably low motive of outflanking the *Québécois*. If everyone had a distinct cultural identity worthy of celebration, yet cared so little to preserve it, Mulroney's faintly ridiculous policies of the 80s would make sense. From now on, with the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, Canadians were committed to the thrills of diversity and, if some remained to be persuaded, here at least was a cause that the country's unemployable students could proselytise at public expense. Of these, William Kymlika, trapped since early adulthood in the eternal adolescence of postgraduate seminars, is the pre-eminent kingmaker—a slew of vacuous tomes sealing his dominance in a field where political fashions count for as much as literary verve. Given how he writes this is just as well. In an impressive field, Kymlika must rank as one of the worst writers in Higher education—a fact which quickly dawns on any unsuspecting reader when forced to wade through the steamroller prose. Like many hapless undergraduates, I was conscripted into his war against the English Language, the iniquitous racket of the 'set text'—meaning I had to pay my dues digesting nuggets like this,

It was this neoliberal version of multiculturalism—ethnicity, mobility and intercultural competence as market assets—that was promoted actively in the 1980s and early 1990s, and that in some places eclipsed the earlier more emancipatory vision of multiculturalism. As a result, many citizens experienced multiculturalism and neoliberalism as a single phenomenon, as two sides of the

same coin that threatened inherited schemes of national solidarity. And understandably, many citizens recoiled from this image of neoliberal multiculturalism, and mobilized to defend national solidarity and the welfare state. But all too often, this mobilization has taken the inverse form of neoliberal multiculturalism: that is to say, welfare chauvinism, or solidarity without inclusion. Social protection is reserved for those who fit some narrow definition of national belonging. Immigrants' access to the welfare state is not only delayed or deferred for varying periods of time, but a range of new obstacles are put in place that make it difficult or unpredictable to meet these thresholds for access. [*\(Solidarity in Diverse Societies: Beyond Neoliberal Multiculturalism and Welfare Chauvinism\)*](#)

If this is bad enough, it pales beside the crippling sense of futility which accompanies it. Many academics, even very considerable ones, write as badly as Kymlika but if with some, the inelegant prose is the price for sublime inspirations, with Kymlika you feel stuck in the eternal present of an exceptionally bad college essay. And yet, what rewards! No academic in living memory has been as well-remunerated for such an onslaught of banality—the research grants piling up year-on-year, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe freeing up half the continent for his daring thoughts.

For all its prolix—the philosophy of liberal multiculturalism is a familiar enough response to a progressive dilemma. For Kymlika, as for all good liberals, autonomy is a trump virtue so essential to human flourishing, that individuals can no more alienate their freedom than they can their humanity. But how do men become free? Until the muscular liberalism of the 19th century entered its decadent phase, the question barely registered. Men born in God's image and implanted with an

innate moral sense were scarcely in need of further profane speculations but anyone looking at the arid utilitarian psychology of Bentham, was bound to wonder how it could produce anything other than desiccated calculating machines swept up by the fleeting sensations of the moment. Nietzsche had seen it coming—his portrait of the Last Man is above all an account of the personal and cultural disintegration which ensues when men are no longer able to sublimate impulse and, having set the scene for that most characteristically modern personality type—the addict, it is as well to note the narcotic oblivion which blights so many aboriginal communities. When pre-modern cultures die, they die with their Gods and it is rarely a pretty sight. It is little wonder sensitive Europeans have been moved to self-reproach particularly when they compare current reality with the Primitive Pocahontas-populated Edens of their imagination. Wholesome, promiscuous, free of cannibalism and conscientiously organic, even hard-nosed Marxists have found merits in the Stone Age. In our own time, it has received its most conscientious support from John Rawls' epic tone poem *The Theory of Justice*.

As any bored student of political philosophy knows, in this turgid epic, the task of securing justice is approached through a revival of a long spent social contract tradition. Denied knowledge of their socio-economic status and of their moral and religious beliefs, Rawls surmises rational individuals would opt amongst other things for an equal share of the "social bases of self-respect"—an unwieldy neologism which begs as many questions as it answers. Most of us are used to thinking of self-respect in terms which imply necessary value judgements. This, after all, is the essence of character and, before the banalities of therapy-speak corrupted our language, the notion of a Right to it would have appeared strange. What claim, after all, does anyone have to the esteem

of a fellow citizen? What censurable harm is really done when someone exercises his freedom to show his benign contempt for a man who fritters his talents counting blades of grass when he might have toiled for progress as a scientist? These are the harsh burdens of freedom—only philosophers and tramps think they can be avoided and Rawls, over acres of casuistry, proceeds to do just that. The grass counter is no hypothetical example—it is a thought experiment at the heart of the book and it shows to what pitiful abysses liberalism can reduce itself to once it sheds its inherited value fat. [“Moral ideals are a kind of sediment,”](#) as Michael Oakeshott noted, [“They have significance only so long as they are suspended in a religious or social tradition.”](#) [Once this goes, all the febrile innovations of intellectuals are thin gruel.”](#)

Of all the pieces of force cleverness thrown into this therapeutic nihilism, Kymlicka's 'culture,' Rawls 'social bases of self-respect' Canadian style, is the most pitifully vacuous. Starting from the premise that *without a secure cultural identity, an individual's ability to function as an autonomous moral agent is neutered*, Kymlicka adds on the plangent lament that minority cultures, vulnerable to the political and economic decisions of a majority culture, may need special dispensations to ensure their culture is able to sustain their members self-worth in ways members of the majority culture take for granted. In Canada, as in Australia, the policy-prescriptions this social engineering implies are familiar enough, and some of it is harmless enough even where clearly fraudulent. A healthy society can afford a certain amount of hucksterism and, if Canadians are broadminded to indulge native American activists with unlikely Scottish surnames, this poses no great existential questions.

Still, it is a tremendous waste of mental energy and, when

such studiously banal platitudes get worked up into national myths Kymlika's culpability seems much greater. Note the assertion that 'everyone has a right to a culture'. Once the habit of non judgementalism is acquired and worked on it is difficult to shake off and, whilst Kymlika has always been emphatic that cultural membership is valuable principally as 'a context for choice, 'his oxymoronic liberal multiculturalism contrives to get the worst of both possible worlds. It has not gone unnoticed. As the more red-blooded multiculturalist Bikhu Parekh has noted, if you apply liberal standards you get well . . . liberalism. Only confusion is generated by adding multiculturalism, especially when you consider that liberalism is nothing if not the abridgement of a distinctive cultural tradition. Kymlika, for obvious reasons, swerves the question—to concede that liberalism has deep roots only in a particular way of life, would be to shift the emphasis on to means of preserving it and this would be a communitarianism too far. For Kymlika, the fragile historic accomplishment of civil society is a solid firmament around which exotic cultures orbit, the latter happy to extort their guilt-ridden tributes and the former floating in an apolitical vacuum comfortably beyond the reach of tribal passions. This is a distinctly demilitarised vision which only someone cocooned in academia could have dreamt up. The cultural identities he talks of look more like Mill's experiments in living than real visceral attachments—a dequate perhaps for capturing the horrors of Caledonian societies but an uncertain guide at best for grappling with burning faiths.

It is, sad to say, a characteristic form of false consciousness amongst well fed white men, and Canadians couldn't have invented it without some help. In in the sixties, as Americans started out on that long drawn out closing of their minds, ethnic frills and thrills were all, particularly amongst adolescent minds who mistook insipid

folklore for the hard substance men were once prepared to kill for. Young roots-conscious Americans started speaking Italian—their Sicilian grandparents didn't understand a word and, when all was said and done, it didn't really matter. Great nations can have silly hobbies as long as those hobbies aren't taken too seriously. Kymlika, to judge by his curious belief that 'identities are fluid and constantly in flux' had exactly these trivial ethnic tags in mind when he wrote his worst but, if it sums up accurately enough the sensibility of Berkeley, it says rather less about Kashmir. And when Kashmir comes to Canada and California, this naiveté has consequences. Cultures that aspire to reproduce themselves across generations usually keep their taboos, and having been so strongly influenced by Rawls' philosophy, he might have deigned to notice how restrictive his checklist of liberal friendly cultures actually is. This is a big subject and there is not enough space to do it justice here but it would be remiss not to notice in passing the poverty of low expectations which underpins this fuzzy culture cult. Civilisation ultimately is a product of deracination and all the anguish it brings. Still not everyone can be a martyr for progress, and the pursuit of the noble savage provides an eternal ideological bolt hole for the malcontents of civilisation particularly when it flatters provincial talents. Herder, the mischievous origin of so much multicultural cant was, in this sense, a supreme exemplar of Conrad's dictum that even the noblest pursuit of justice is prepared by a personal resentment. In the summer of his youth when he set out as German provincial to make his name as an artist, Paris held no equal—after his haughty rebuff, all the arts of civilisation were an illusion and he had convinced himself that peasants were the authentic repositories of sacred wisdom. This was the characteristic Romantic sensibility. In countries like Britain where the premodern was picturesque and under armed guard, it inspired nothing worse than kilts and fraudulent Gallic Homers (who but those with a heart of stone can now read Ossian without laughing) In Central Europe, where modernity came late

and blew chilly, the effects were profound and instructive. Here, Kultur faced off against civilisation, *gemeinschaft* against *gesellschaft* and, if such distinctions could strike a chord with minds as exalted as Thomas Mann or Werner Sombart, how much more could be expected in Braunau on the Inn?

It was this question, not communism per se, that Popper addressed in his famous opening lines to *The Open Society and its Enemies*.

This civilization has not yet fully recovered from the shock of its birth—the transition from the tribal or “enclosed society,” with its submission to magical forces, to the ‘open society’ which sets free the critical powers of man.

It attempts to show that the shock of this transition is one of the factors that have made possible the rise of those reactionary movements which have tried, and still try, to overthrow civilisation and to return to tribalism.

This is still a live question in 2017 and it is worrying that we remain confused about the lessons of history. To read the vapid literature of the globalisation movement, when all the Rousseaesque sentimentality is set aside, is to be plunged back into the cold certainties of the counter Enlightenment with no reassurance we are going to emerge unscathed. Cultures which have made their peace with the modern world can afford some premodern cross dressing, but it ill-behooves them to import populations which have not even begun to make the transition from status to contract, particularly when the

welfare state obviates any need to exchange primitive solidarity for 21st century opportunities. Kymlicka, like most of the Aeropogus inhabiting nomenclature of North American academia, can afford to swerve the question but even the most fastidious social democracy cannot shoulder these burdens indefinitely. Besides, what happens when the 'other' becomes a dominant host? The question barely registers even as a footnote in smug Canadian platitudes on the subject and it is not a problem which will disappear on its own. Multiculturalism in academia is nominally a creed of open mindedness writ large, but little of it is reciprocated and some, at least, view it much like Erdogan views democracy—a bus you can alight from once you reach the destination. These are not minor considerations. If demography does not entirely determine destiny, neither do ideas exist in a social and demographic vacuum. European civil societies are ultimately a legacy of necessary compromises—if Calvinists had out outbred their opponents in a generation, it is doubtful they would have become a byword for dissenting tolerance. Can Canadians expect a similar forbearance as they reprimativise at breakneck speed? Better hope so.

Postscript

The Eskimo Question

It turns out I wasn't too wrong anyway, and I know from reliable sources (Wikipedia) that even Inuit is tainted by the cultural imperialism of the Inuit Circumpolar Council. Predictably, in the USA they're less bothered too—Alaskan natives are apparently fine with it. It's a small thing but the memory still hurts and, when you hit early onset mediocrity, the chance of avenging yourself on the past is too

tempting to pass up. On the slightly graver question of how milleting minority cultures actually improves the life chances of their members, I would refer readers to the brilliant but, sadly, deceased anthropologist Roger Sandall, whose critique of New Age primitivism, *The Culture Cult* is the best last word on the subject. As Sandall noted, most of the grim social pathologies that afflict the Australian aborigines are of recent vintage, and he was not slow to identify the culprit.

If your traditional way of life has no alphabet, no writing, no books, and no libraries, and yet you are continually told that you have a culture which is "rich," "complex," and "sophisticated," how can you realistically see your place in the scheme of things? If all such hyperbole were true, who would need books or writing? Why not hang up a "Gone Fishing" sign and head for the beach? I might do that myself. In Australia, policies inspired by the Culture Cult have brought the illiterization of thousands of Aborigines whose grandparents could read and write.

This is hardly a tribute to the benefits of multiculturalism and, if the case is an extreme one, the lessons to be learned have a wider currency. The most humane policy would have been to fully integrate Aborigines into Australian society for the simple reason that stone age societies can only survive in the 21st century through acts of charity and, whatever slum missionary anthropologists might imagine, this is always received with servile dependence and burning resentment.

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