

The Canadian conversation

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From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

Published Tuesday, Mar. 27 2007, 12:00 AM EDT

Last updated Friday, Mar. 13 2009, 9:22 PM EDT

Were you, like me, watching Quebec's election results pouring in last night, remembering Jacques Parizeau's denunciation of "the ethnic vote" in 1995 and anticipating that one of the defeated candidates might blame his ill-deserved fate on veiled Muslim voters -- all 67 of them?

If you think this imagining absurd, you haven't been following the news lately. From Quebec in the past few months has come a gush of stories on what are being called "the limits of reasonable accommodation," that is, the accommodation of religious minorities by the vast majority of others who either have no religion or embrace lukewarm versions of their faiths.

For example, there was the kerfuffle over whether the Montreal YMCA should install frosted windows to spare the young men in the Hasidic synagogue next door the sight of women in workout gear on treadmills. And the case of the (Muslim) soccer referee ejecting an 11-year-old girl from a game because he interpreted the rules of soccer's international federation, FIFA, as precluding the wearing of a hijab. And it's not only happening in la belle province. There was the recent case of the Muslim art student at the University of Western Ontario who objected on religious grounds to drawing nudes, and was initially told she would have to do so or risk failing the whole upper-level drawing course.

Though diverse in their particulars, each of these stories seemed to raise a single glaring question: Where has common sense gone?

First, and most obviously, this country does have a lot of newcomers. We are averaging well over a quarter-million a year -- the highest immigration rate in the world. Societies with much less ambitious immigration programs express less sanguine attitudes about immigration. Although we should not be patient with racism or intolerance, we should acknowledge that Canada has taken on a significant challenge in accepting so many newcomers from such a diversity of backgrounds.

Second, immigrants to Canada are no longer coming from European countries as they did prior to 1970; they are now predominantly from Asia and other parts of the world. Today's newcomers have different religions and different customs; it is a bigger leap for them to adapt to Canadian customs.

In a recent survey that my firm, Environics, conducted on public opinion toward immigration, multiculturalism and Muslims, we found generally positive attitudes to immigrants and, more specifically, to Canada's rapidly growing (mostly foreign-born) Muslim minority. Still, there are signs of concern: Two-thirds of Canadians believe that "too many immigrants do not adopt Canadian values."

We surveyed Muslim Canadians, too, a representative sample of 500. Muslim Canadians told us that, yes, their Muslim identity is important to them. A large majority also said they believe most of their fellow Muslims want to adopt Canadian customs and participate fully. A majority of the public, by contrast, suspect Canadian Muslims wish to remain separate from the wider society.

It is this basic disconnect -- Muslims' belief that Muslim Canadians wish to integrate, the general public's concern that Muslim Canadians wish to remain apart -- that underlies differences between the two groups on other issues, most notably sharia law. If Canadians had more confidence in Canadian Muslims' general desire to integrate into society, practical issues like a hijab on a soccer field would not be so symbolically charged. And if those pragmatic accommodations were made more easily, it would be easier for Canadian Muslims to feel that society wants them to participate fully in Canada's life: its institutions, its recreations, its communities.

Our survey data suggest Canadian Muslims are saying: Relax. We are generally happy here and are proud to be Canadians. We wish to integrate, especially into the economy. We want jobs commensurate with our high qualifications and we want to pay taxes and receive public services. And yes, we wish to be free to retain some of our traditional religious and cultural practices. We don't want to be discriminated against and we don't want false alarms over a harmless head scarf.

What Canadians are saying is two things. Bienvenue au Canada and read the Charter. In it, you will see we have two core values: freedom and equality. Freedom to be yourself (within the confines of the law) and equality, our way of achieving freedom. First and foremost, women are equal to men. The vast majority of Canadians have rejected patriarchy, which is part of the reason many of us have questioned and often rejected traditional religious belief and practice. We do not require you to reject your religion (religious freedom is protected in our beloved Charter, too), but we do expect you to embrace our value of gender equality. That, in a nutshell, is our concern with sharia law. It also lies at the root of our sometimes irrational-seeming reaction to head scarves. We worry hijabs are signs of patriarchy rather than expressions of Muslim women's lib. But we may be wrong; let's talk.

And finally, what Quebeckers are saying is this -- and more. We are a remarkable society made anxious by being a tiny francophone enclave nestled within an English-speaking North American behemoth, faced with demographic decline due to our (voluntarily) having one of the lowest fertility rates on the planet. Our very existence is the product of centuries of tenacious struggle. Like our European cousins, we are worried that the inflow of people from other civilizations will destroy what is familiar and unique about us.

In the end, this debate over the limits of reasonable accommodation is a non-violent conversation with and about "the other" -- and in Canada, we are all others. The challenge for Canadians, new and old, will be to debate the matter with as much empathy and imagination as we can muster. And we should take heart: This debate over difference is neither new nor unusual; it is the Canadian conversation, which began the day after Generals Wolfe and Montcalm left the Plains of Abraham for another utopia in the sky.

Michael Adams is president of the Environics group of research and consulting companies. His book *Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism* will be published this fall.