

*Almost four years have passed since my “Multiculturalism- Reflections in 2007” was published in Perspectives, the newsletter of the BC Association of Social Workers. This article incorporates that reflection with a 2011 perspective. I conclude with some thoughts for the Strathcona Employment Assistance Services (SEAS) as it celebrates 39 years of exemplary community services.*

Every year’s end I clean up my work stations and attempt to go through the many boxes of reports and files which have accumulated through the years as a result of my “let’s keep that for a while” attitude. Recently I had time for a substantial tsunami clean up. It was a major emotional roller coaster as I went through 30 years of work experiences, conference summaries and task forces. In the 1970’s it was the many reports and conferences on a new concept called “multiculturalism”. In the 1980’s there were added human rights programs on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and this was expanded 1990’s to include “equity” initiatives. This evolved into “diversity” and “inclusiveness” as the 21st century arrived. But how much progress and social change has happened under any of these banners? Whatever was accomplished, why did it take so long? Importantly, have we lost some of our gains?

It was in 1971 that the federal government adopted a multiculturalism policy and in 1988 a *Multiculturalism Act*. British Columbia followed with its own *Multiculturalism Act* in 1993. For the first time governments expressed values to respect cultural heritage and diversity, mutual self-respect, cross-cultural communication, and the elimination of racism. Government policies and programs were to incorporate these values in their operations, programs and services. “Integration” and “acculturation” rather than “assimilation” were the goals.

Multiculturalism legislation, however, due to its nature was more symbolic than substantive for organizational change. This was to be addressed by the federal *Employment Equity Act* in 1985 which followed a Royal Commission on Employment chaired by Judge Rosalie Abella. This legislation addressed the more salient issues of systemic employment barriers to participation by Aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities, visible minorities and women. It called for comprehensive employment systems reviews, targets and timetables for hiring, and along with human rights legislation, was intended to result in systemic changes. After some 25 years of the *Act* which has jurisdiction only over federally regulated employers (about 10 per cent of the Canadian work force) the results are mixed. While there have been some “gains” for women and members of visible minority groups, there has been minor change for the employment of Aboriginal peoples and people with disabilities.

Could there have been more progress after so many years? Why have some government services retracted to where they were five or ten years ago? What are the continuing consequences for the failure to provide equitable and culturally responsive services? What challenges still need to be addressed to provide equitable access in employment and services?

I left the provincial government as policy manager with the Ministry of Multiculturalism some nine years ago. Our unit worked with the public, private and non-profit sectors to assist in multiculturalism policies, organizational change and anti-racism initiatives to better meet the needs of a culturally and racially diverse province. I learned early in government that social justice and equality of access arguments alone were not enough to move the agenda. Rather, there was need to include the business case for diversity, the operational necessity for cultural competence, and the advantages of inclusion. As with all change initiatives, executive leadership, organizational commitment, operational integration,

and continuing assessments for progress are required. Otherwise, the change would be piecemeal and interim at best. This is not rocket-science but the basics of organizational change theory.

I pose that organizations are organic and have memory. When supporting mechanisms for change are not in place, the organization reverts back to where to its original structure. Often, its norms, policies, and values were developed when institutions were intended to meet the needs of an English and French Canada; a country in which white, Christian, able-bodied, heterosexual, Canadian-born men dominated the work place. Policies and structures were in place to support their participation and success.

However, beginning in 1967 with the end of racial immigration restrictions and introduction of a point system, Canada encountered major demographic changes. As well, more women entered the work force and people with disabilities wanted to participate in society. In 1985 Section 15, the equality section of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, became law and this was used to litigate for equality. Initial judicial decisions sanctioned the concept of “reasonable accommodation” in employment and by the 1990’s this evolved to “duty to accommodate” under all Charter grounds, e.g. religion, disability, sex, family status. In 1992 the courts ruled that sexual orientation, while not specifically stated in the Charter, was a prohibited ground of discrimination. Thus human rights for gays/lesbians and transgendered people became included in Canadian law. The status quo paradigm was under much pressure for access, equity and inclusion of all Canadians and not just the “founding races” of the English and French.

By the 1980’s the changing socio-cultural demographics of Canada made the requirement to address cultural diversity even more critical. Immigration from European and other “traditional” source countries declined while that from Asian countries grew and have continued to be the main sources of immigrants to Canada. The 2006 census reported that Metro Vancouver’s population of 2.1 million was almost 42% visible minority with 381,500 people of Chinese origin and 207,000 of South Asian. The City of Richmond was 65% visible minority, the highest in Canada. The next national census (assuming there will be long-form!) will undoubtedly show higher statistics on the multicultural, multi-lingual, and multi-racial reality for Canada, in particular the urban centres like Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal. This makes providing culturally responsive health care, social services and employment programs even more paramount.

But how far are we towards the goals of culturally responsive institutions and services today? Are we further ahead than five or ten years ago? Definitely at the individual level we are better informed and more astute. But what about government services, community agencies, and post-secondary institutions? After almost forty years of multiculturalism policy, do our institutions and agencies reflect the multicultural and multi-racial reality that is Canada? Are they adequately prepared to provide inclusive services? Do people with disabilities in particular those from immigrant and minority communities have equitable access to employment? Unfortunately, the answer is no.

What happened? Was it government cutbacks, the absence of political and executive leadership, the resistance of institutions to change, the lack of knowledge and skills, or all of the above? We already have many reports on “best practices”. Let us not wait for another study but rather take the time to consider what is required, take action and move forward.

In the 1980’s and 1990’s did organizations change structurally and systemically? Or did these changes only happen with interim leadership and failed to be internalized. In corporate vision statements for the

21<sup>st</sup> century, was the image of the community a multicultural and multi-racial public, or did it revert back to the 1950 perspectives of *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father's Knows Best*?

Requirements for sustained organizational change include not only executive leadership but the integration of change policies and practices into all operations and procedures including corporate culture. Has this happened? Who makes the decisions? Who has been hired? Do they reflect the community we need to serve? Why are we still looking at more task forces on foreign credentials when this issue was identified many years ago? Where are the bridging programs for engineers, nurses, teachers, social workers and other professionals who acquired their education overseas? They have skills and experiences to contribute but they continue to be denied. Or what about the perpetual issues of adequate language and employment programs for immigrants? And is there affordable day-care available for working families?

For the last few years I have been fortunate to be a sessional instructor in the Faculty of Education and the School of Social Work at the University of B.C. This has provided opportunities to interact with a younger generation who are passionate about their future professions. However, to this passion must be added the skills to critically examine and address structural oppression and to strive for systemic changes, whether they be on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation or class.

Reluctantly I have come to realize that for many post-secondary students today (and I include myself when I was their age), their high school and university education has not prepared them to understand a multicultural and multi-racial Canada. There has been inadequate discussion of Canada's past as an exploiter of Aboriginal peoples, immigrants, women, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians and religious minorities. Our nation is essentially presented with a "Canadian-Egyptian Aquatic perspective", "*de-Nile*" (denial). There is an ideology that our laws, institutions and policies have been reasonable and fair. We have been socialized through a Disney lens.

Over the years in discussions on "what's wrong with multiculturalism" my initial response was defensiveness but I learned that this approach limited my learning and dialogue. Multiculturalism has failed, according to critics like Neil Bissoondath, because it keeps people isolated in their own "ethnic ghettos", threatens our sense of national unity, and challenges our national values. After all, why can't they be just like us, eh?

Integration, however, is a two way street. Have structural barriers in employment, education, policing and social services been adequately addressed to allow for people to become "Canadian"? Who has the influence and power to make these changes? And just what are "Canadian" values, eh? Slow progress on addressing the impact of racism against Aboriginal peoples? Condemning gays and lesbians from religious tenets? Attending religious worship only on annual holidays rather than daily? Continued service and employment barriers to people with disabilities? How about dining Japanese, Thai and Chinese, and sipping a Tim Horton's double-double? Or are Canadians values about contributions to community, citizenship participation and mutual self-respect?

The critiques of multiculturalism helped me confirm my definition of the concept. This includes affirmation for cultural diversity, mutual self-respect, cross-cultural understanding and dialogue, an inclusive society and the elimination of all discriminatory barriers. I appreciate the contrasts and

conflicts between individual and collectivist rights and feel they can be discussed within the framework of informed choice. Multiculturalism should be interactive and dynamic, not isolationist and static. It must include anti-racism not only in regards to one's own group but to all Canadians. It must be allies in challenging classism, sexism, heterosexism and all forms of discrimination. We cannot cherry pick our human rights. It's a package deal, that's being real Canadian.

As SEAS celebrates its 39 years of exemplary community services in 2011, new and old challenges remain. Its decades of success are the results of effective partnerships amongst government, SEAS, employers and the community. As newcomers settle and gain work experiences, they will be better informed on Canadian labour, human rights and multiculturalism legislation. Employers, within and outside of the Chinese-Canadian community, should better understand their responsibilities to become more inclusive, in particular to people with disabilities who are skilled and awaiting opportunities for participation. SEAS and Chinese-speaking community members (clients and employers) also face future challenges as the provincial government moves towards a local privatized model of service delivery. Hopefully, this continued multi-party partnership will be able to effectively address any and all issues which may arise as a result of these major changes to continue the high standard of community services.

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