

QUEBEC'S BIG ACCOMMODATION DEBATE

Introduction

Focus

This *News in Review* story investigates the “reasonable accommodation” debate in the province of Quebec. We also review the sources of intolerance.

Definition

In this story the term *reasonable accommodation* refers to what extent a society should reasonably shape its rules and values to “accommodate” religious or cultural considerations.

Further Research

Learn more about the reasonable accommodation commission at www.accommodements.qc.ca/commission/plan-de-travail-en.html.

In January 2007, the small Quebec town of Hérouxville became the object of international attention. The town council issued a set of “standards” for newcomers. The standards were seen as “insulting” and “racist” by many. Among the standards are the following statements:

- It is forbidden to stone women or burn them with acid.
- Children cannot take any weapons to school.
- Boys and girls cannot be segregated and will swim together in pools.
- Female police officers can arrest male suspects.
- Women are allowed to drive, dance, and make decisions on their own.
- Hérouxville children sing Christmas songs at Christmas and adults can drink alcohol.

The document was created in response to a number of cases in Quebec where immigrants had challenged social institutions to allow them to practise religious freedom. For example, a Sikh boy wanted to wear his ceremonial dagger—known as a *kirpan*—to a Montreal school.

André Drouin, one of the town councillors, denied that the “standards” are racist. Instead, he claimed that immigrants need to know what Canadian values exist in Hérouxville before they make the decision to move there. “I asked myself, ‘How is it that these people can ask for such things?’ And the only possible answer is that these people do not know who we are” (“Town outlines ‘norms’ for newcomers: Move is

latest sign of growing debate surrounding ‘Reasonable Accommodation,’” *Guelph Mercury*, January 30, 2007).

But others disagreed. In February, Canadian Muslim groups said they would file a complaint with the Quebec Human Rights Commission against the town of Hérouxville because it “clearly propagates negative stereotypes of Canadian minorities.”

In February 2007, the Quebec government ordered a special commission to study accommodations made to the province’s religious, ethnic, and cultural minorities. Gérard Bouchard, a sociologist, and Charles Taylor, a philosopher, were picked by Quebec Premier Jean Charest to head the commission. The commissioners began holding public hearings in Quebec in September 2007. Within one year they are to produce a report detailing the various concerns and to develop a series of acceptable accommodations.

Although the commission was designed to help the province better deal with the issue of reasonable accommodation, when the public hearings began in September, they sparked controversy all over again. Some of those participating in the hearings are extremely hostile to non-European immigration to Quebec of any kind. Many would be described as racist. This has led some observers to state that the hearings are actually increasing intolerance in the province. But others argue that the hearings are a strong example of freedom of speech and that they represent what is good and valuable in a democracy.

To Consider

1. What kinds of reasonable accommodations have been made in your school and community for people of diverse backgrounds? Be specific.
2. Do you believe that Canadians have become less tolerant and more racist?
3. Have you or your friends ever experienced racism? Have you ever acted in a racist or prejudiced manner? Explain.
4. What do you think causes racism?
5. Do you believe that the work of the Commission will ultimately lead to increased tolerance?

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Video Review

Quote

"Who are we?
How do we want
to live together?"
— Jacques
Beauchenin,
Montreal
sociologist,
Toronto Star,
September 26,
2007

Did you know . . .

Since 1990, an
average of 225 000
immigrants have
arrived in Canada
every year.

Did you know . . .

The Quebec town
of Hérouxville—
which ignited
the debate over
reasonable
accommodation—
has been
nicknamed
"Heroville" by
some Canadians.
What does this
reveal about some
Canadians?

Previewing Task: What is reasonable accommodation?

With a partner, or in a small group, discuss and make notes on the following:

1. If you moved to another country that had very different legal, political, and cultural norms from those you experience in Canada, how much of the country's culture and beliefs would you be willing to accept?

2. What if the dominant religion in that culture was different than your own? Would you still practise your religion, even if you were part of a small minority with the same beliefs?

3. If citizens of your new country were hostile to your Canadian beliefs and values, would you give up those beliefs and traditions to improve harmony?

4. How much should your new country change to accommodate you? Explain your answer.

The Video

Watch the video and respond to the following questions in the space provided.

1. What issue is causing so much concern in Quebec?

2. What happened in Hérouxville to ignite this debate?

3. What are some of the main issues raised by this debate?

4. List some of the "accommodations" that have been made for new Canadians in Quebec.

5. Do you think the arguments raised by the town council of Hérouxville and others who spoke at the hearings are based on fact or fear? Explain.

6. How do you think these negative statements would make new Canadians feel?

Reflection

What standard of reasonable accommodation should we develop in Canada? Try to be as specific as possible.

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Determining What is "Reasonable"

Definition

A *hijab* is a headscarf, a *niqab* is a face veil, and a *burqa* is a long, loose outer garment, sometimes with a full face covering. These are worn by some Muslim women.

Canada has a population of around 32 million people. Thousands of new immigrants and refugees arrive in Canada each year. In fact, Canada accepts more immigrants and refugees each year than any other nation in the world. It should not be surprising that "old" and "new" Canadians sometimes see the world differently. In general, Canadians have adapted peacefully and positively to the changing face of

Canada. But over the past few years there have been a number of cases that have caused conflict between two or more groups in Canada. Each case involves the issue of reasonable accommodation. But as you'll see, people differ in their interpretation of what is "reasonable." As you read each of the cases below, record whether or not you think the decision made was reasonable or not, and explain why.

October 2007 – Montreal Canadiens captain criticized for not speaking French
Saku Koivu, the captain of the Montreal Canadiens hockey team, has received a great deal of criticism within Quebec because he does not speak French. Some people believe that, as captain of the team, Koivu acts as an ambassador for Quebec. Koivu, who is Finnish and learned English when he moved to Canada, said that even though he doesn't speak French well, he loves Montreal and does a lot for the community. Parti Québécois Leader, Pauline Marois, suggested that Canadiens players who don't speak French should take lessons to learn.

Reasonable? (Y/N) ___ Why? _____

May 2007 – Hutterites not required to have photos
Hutterites (a Christian community) believe that it is a sin to have their photo taken. Although the Alberta government began requiring Hutterites to have photo identification in 2003, two Hutterite communities appealed this decision. In May, the Alberta Court of Appeal ruled that forcing Hutterites to have their picture taken violated their constitutional right to religious freedom. In December 2007, the Supreme Court of Canada agreed to hear the case.

Reasonable? (Y/N) ___ Why? _____

March 2007 – Women required to raise veils before voting
Days before the provincial election in Quebec, authorities announced that women wearing a *niqab* or *burqa* would have to lift their veils in order to vote. It is law that all voters must have their identity confirmed before voting. However, thousands of Canadians send their votes in by mail and never have their identity visually confirmed.

Reasonable? (Y/N) ___ Why? _____

February 2007 – Muslim girl ejected from soccer game
An 11-year-old girl was ejected from a soccer game in Quebec because she was wearing her *hijab*. She had played soccer for years, and the *hijab* had never been raised as an issue before. The official at the Quebec tournament said he was enforcing international soccer rules that ban any type of head covering.

Reasonable? (Y/N) ___ Why? _____

December 2006 – Judge orders Christmas tree removed

An Ontario judge ordered that a Christmas tree be removed from the lobby of a Toronto courthouse. The judge was concerned that the tree might offend non-Christians and make them feel like outsiders in the court house.

Reasonable? (Y/N) ___ Why? _____

October 2006 – YMCA frosts glass windows at request of synagogue

A YMCA in downtown Montreal frosted the glass windows of its exercise area after receiving complaints from a synagogue for Hasidic Jews, located across the street from the YMCA. The rabbi of the synagogue complained that male worshippers were being distracted by women exercising at the gym. (The YMCA later replaced the frosted glass with clear glass and window blinds after receiving complaints about the frosted glass from some of the women who exercised at the facility. The women felt it was wrong for them to be hidden from view. Now the blinds are raised or lowered at the request of those exercising in the gym.)

Reasonable? (Y/N) ___ Why? _____

May 2006 – Muslim schoolgirls allowed swim test in private

Three Muslim schoolgirls in Quebec asked to be excused from swimming class because their religion forbade them from sharing a pool with males. The school board said the girls could not be excused from a key part of the physical education curriculum, but did allow the girls to be tested privately by a female instructor.

Reasonable? (Y/N) ___ Why? _____

March 2006 – Quebec college ordered to find prayer space for Muslim students

A complaint was made to the Quebec Human Rights Commission (www.cdpdj.qc.ca) by about 100 Muslim students because they were unhappy about having to pray in a stairwell. The Commission ruled that the college had a responsibility to offer reasonable prayer accommodation to the Muslim students, such as an empty classroom. But the Commission also stated that the college was not under any obligation to build a separate prayer facility for the students.

Reasonable? (Y/N) ___ Why? _____

Reflection

Consider what you learned from these cases. With a partner, write your own definition of reasonable accommodation. Be prepared to share your definition with the class.

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The Quebec Challenge

Archives

To learn more about the tumultuous Quiet Revolution, go to the CBC Digital Archives at www.cbc.ca/archives and explore the audio-visual file entitled "Quebec Elections, 1960-2007." If you understand French, visit the Radio-Canada archives at archives.radio-canada.ca and review the file "Élections au Québec : si la tendance se maintient . . ."

Pre-Reading Task

With a partner, discuss the following points. Record your responses in your notebook.

- In what ways is Quebec unique as a province?
- Why might Quebecers be more concerned about multiculturalism than Canadians in other parts of the country?
- Does multiculturalism pose a threat to French-Canadian culture in Quebec?

Consider This

Since 1990, Canada has received about 225 000 immigrants a year. Most of those immigrants have been from non-Western countries, including those in Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Nearly three-quarters of them have settled in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. So if immigrants have been spread throughout the country why has Quebec become the centre of debate regarding reasonable accommodation? One reason is that Quebec is the most homogeneous province in the country. Approximately 80 per cent of the population is of French ancestry.

The dominant religion in Quebec is Roman Catholicism. French settlers brought the religion to the area, and, for most of Quebec's history, the Catholic Church played a dominant role in daily life. Schools were religious, hospitals and social services were run by Catholic nuns, and government policy was often shaped by Catholic principles. It wasn't until the 1960s that a period of widespread social, economic, and political change occurred in the province. During the "Quiet Revolution" the conservative, agrarian, and religious values of the past were thrown out because Quebecers believed these values were hurting the economic and social development of the province.

To Consider

Revisit your responses to the opening three questions. Update your answers based on the information you learned in this section.

Having only recently removed crucifixes—the principal symbol of Christianity—from all of its schools, Quebecers are particularly sensitive to public displays of religious faith. Many Quebecers believe that religion is a private matter and that it should not interfere with matters of state. So when any group argues that it has a constitutional right to live by the tenets of its religion publicly, many Quebecers react negatively.

Public displays of religious faith in Quebec schools have caused the greatest concern. When a Sikh student wore his *kirpan*—a ceremonial dagger—to a Montreal school in 2001, he was sent home. The Supreme Court of Canada eventually resolved the case in favour of the boy on the grounds that banning the *kirpan* from the school violated the student's guarantee of religious freedom outlined in the Charter of Rights.

Disagreements have arisen recently because of the greater number of Muslim immigrants who live in the province. Some Muslims have argued for separate prayer spaces in some high schools. And some have requested that these spaces be for boys only. This issue was resolved after a separate prayer space, open to both boys and girls, was created in the high school in question.

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Multiculturalism in Canada

Further Research

To learn more about Canada's policy on multiculturalism, visit the department of Canadian Heritage and view the multiculturalism Web site at www.pch.gc.ca/progs/multi/index_e.cfm.

Canada is a multicultural nation. This simply means that Canadians are not of any one cultural background, race, or heritage. Instead, Canada is composed of a vast diversity of peoples. This multicultural diversity is a result of centuries of immigration.

Although Canada has always been multicultural, the nature of this multiculturalism has changed over the years. One significant change is that since the early 1970s, the majority of immigrants to Canada have been "people of colour." These immigrants have come from the developing world or other non-European areas. Before this time, the majority of immigrants to Canada largely came from Europe or other Western nations.

Canada's multiculturalism has largely developed as a result of government policies. Many of these policies were designed to promote harmony and respect individual differences. A selection of government policies that have fostered multiculturalism are listed below. As you read about the policies, consider which may have had the greatest impact on our perspective of multiculturalism today.

1947 – Passage of the first Canadian Citizenship Act

This ensured that for the first time in Canadian history immigrants from non-Commonwealth countries applying for Canadian citizenship were on an equal footing with immigrants who were British subjects.

1960 – Passage of the Canadian Bill of Rights

This was the first federal statute to bar discrimination on the grounds of race, national origin, colour, religion, or sex.

1963 – Establishment of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism

The Commission explored the contribution of the "two founding races," but also the contribution of "other ethnics" to the cultural enrichment of Canada.

1971 – Introduction of Canada's Multiculturalism Policy

The government committed itself to supporting all of Canada's cultures and improving intercultural understanding and the social development of cultural groups.

1982 – Adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

The Charter relates to issues regarding diversity and multiculturalism in two sections. Section 15(1) reaffirms the concepts of equality and freedom from discrimination, while section 27 states that the Charter will be "interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians." It also guarantees religious freedom to all Canadians.

1988 – Passage of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act

The Act defined multiculturalism as a central characteristic of Canadian society.

Have Canadians Become Less Tolerant of Multiculturalism?

There has been a great deal of negative publicity surrounding the "reasonable accommodation" hearings in Quebec. But do the people speaking against immigrants at those hearings speak for the majority of Canadians? Or, do they

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A Range of Opinion

As you read the range of opinions below, complete a t-chart in your notebook with the following headings: Arguments in Favour of Multiculturalism and Arguments against Multiculturalism.

The current friction over the reasonable accommodation debate is making some people very nervous. For these people, the debate itself, and some of the sentiments being expressed at the Boucher-Taylor hearings, indicate that Canada is becoming a less tolerant nation. Others, however, argue that this debate is evidence of our strong democracy and a reflection of our constitutional right to free speech. Hiding our disagreements does not make us more tolerant or help us to better understand each other.

“If Canada is going to successfully absorb 250 000 (new immigrants) a year, we need more public debate and education about our national values, not less. . . . New and old Canadians will have to learn to adapt to the changing realities—everything from head scarves to same-sex marriages—just as their predecessors did in the past. — Adrienne Clarkson, Canada’s former governor general, (“Do immigrants need rules? The debate rages on,” *Maclean’s*, March 5, 2007)

“One of these days you will have (many divided) groups in Canada and groups in Canada, or groups in any country, doesn’t make a country.” — Andre Drouin, town councillor, Hérouxville, Quebec (“Town outlines ‘norms’ for newcomers,” *Guelph Mercury*, January 30, 2007)

“The Quebec nation has values, solid values, including the equality of women and men; the primacy of

French; the separation between the state and religion. These values are fundamental. They cannot be the object of any accommodation. They cannot be subordinated to any other principle.” — Jean Charest, Premier of Quebec (“Defining a Quebecer will not be an easy task,” *The Record*, February 13, 2007)

“(Canada has) done very well in getting past issues of race, skin colour, ethnicity, and religion—something Europe is yet to fully come to terms with but simply must. If you want to be a global player in the movement of goods and capital, you cannot stop the freer movement of peoples and cultures. Closed societies are dangerous societies. — Jan Niesen, director of Migration Policy Group, Brussels (“Don’t give in to prevailing prejudices,” *Toronto Star*, March 8, 2007)

“I fear that foreigners will impose their values on us, so we’ll lose our place. It is like I invite someone into my home and he slowly shows me the door.” — a 67-year-old retired engineer in Saguenay speaking to Bouchard-Taylor Commission (“Multiculturalism under the microscope in Quebec,” *Toronto Star*, October 13, 2007)

“Multiculturalism allows people to accentuate our differences. It’s really forcing people not to be part of a cohesive society.” — Tarek Fatah, founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress (“Do immigrants need rules? The debate rages on,” *Maclean’s*, March 5, 2007)

“As our society becomes more diverse it is natural for a conversation about our evolving identity to arise. However, the key to success lies in that conversation being grounded in respect and dignity rather than mistrust and division.”

— Omar Alghabra, MP (*Toronto Star*, November 7, 2007)

“I’m a Somali first. I don’t say I’m Canadian. I’m a Canadian citizen, but when someone comes up to me and asks me what my nationality is, I don’t say Canadian or Somali-Canadian. I say I’m Somali. That’s how they know me. . . . Africans that immigrated here don’t even consider themselves Canadian. They say they’re Canadian citizens but usually you don’t say to yourself, ‘Oh, I’m a proud Canadian’ like the Molson Canadian (beer) commercials. No one ever says that. Only Caucasian people think that . . .” — Mohamed Osman (“Voices,” *Toronto Star*, June 30, 2007)

“Equity is about meeting needs, not about treating everyone exactly the same.” — Yaw Obeng, supervising principal for equity, Toronto District School Board (“Operation colour-blind,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 10, 2006)

“But our elected leaders, as well as every one of us, must remain vigilant to attacks on multiculturalism and ensure immigrants and minority groups are treated fairly and that their integration into Canadian society is as smooth as possible. Instead of questioning multiculturalism, we should reaffirm the inclusiveness and tolerance that has made modern Canada a success.” — Editor, *Toronto Star* (“Canadian reality is multicultural,” *Toronto Star*, October 15, 2007)

Reflect and Debate

Use your chart to develop debate points for the following resolution: Be it determined that multiculturalism is a good thing and strengthens Canada as a nation.

Be sure to include points for both sides of the debate question. You don’t know which side of the debate you will be asked to argue.

| Arguments for Multiculturalism | Arguments Against Multiculturalism |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | |

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Sources of Fear

"I am ashamed to be a Quebecer sometimes, like when I hear idiocies like those coming from Hérouxville. Ignorance and fear produce xenophobia and racism, and the ideas of the extreme right." — Jean-Pierre Trépanier, Quebec citizen ("Quebec heartland debates threat from 'Canadian style' multiculturalism," Canadian Press, October 23, 2007)

Xenophobia is a fear or contempt of foreigners or strangers. Xenophobia is usually associated with racism because if a person has contempt for another person or group, they are more likely to act in a cruel or discriminatory manner toward that person. Racism is often linked to the belief that the members of one race are intrinsically superior to members of other races.

Some of the speakers at the reasonable accommodation hearings in Quebec appear to be xenophobic and/or racist. But other speakers are not. Why is it that some people hold racist beliefs and others do not? There is no conclusive answer, but research in the social sciences has produced some insight into this question.

A Psychological Perspective

Most psychologists believe that racist beliefs are not innate—that is, that humans are not born racist. Instead, psychologists tend to believe that racist attitudes are the result of socialization. Socialization is the process of learning one's culture and how to live within it.

One element of socialization is the family and those closest to the children. Children learn by observing their parents and other family members, their friends, and their neighbours. If children hear the people around them expressing prejudices, they are very likely to adopt

the same beliefs. If children see those around them acting in a racist manner, they are likely to imitate that behaviour. If children see their parents express tolerance, then they are likely to be tolerant as well.

Another element of socialization is media—books, television, radio, movies, and online information. If the type of media a child is exposed to perpetuates stereotypes by assigning certain characteristics to particular groups, children are more likely to grow up believing those stereotypes. For example, in the past, children's books tended to portray males and females in traditional roles—men were more likely to be shown in the role of doctor, while women were more likely to be shown as nurses,, for example.

Many psychologists believe that racism results from ignorance. Ignorance simply refers to lack of information. When we lack information about something we are more likely to believe stereotypes. According to this, someone who lives in a small town with a homogeneous population would be more likely to be racist because that person simply would not have had exposure to a diverse population.

Psychologists also believe fear plays a role in racism. Fear tends to occur when we are in a situation we don't understand because it is different from what we are used to. When we become fearful, we tend to look for a scapegoat to blame for our problems. If, for example, unemployment is rising or the national economy is very weak, many people will look for a scapegoat to blame. In most cases they will choose the people they do not know, such as those with a different ethnic or cultural background. This is how fear can lead to racism.

A Sociological Perspective

Sociologists look at the way particular groups are valued or devalued in society. In Canadian society, white males consistently dominate the highest income group in the country. Sociologists believe this is because white males are the highest valued group in society. This white privilege often means that white males may have an easier time

finding a well-paying job, that their contributions within an organization are more highly regarded and rewarded, and that they may be promoted more quickly than others. Because white males tend to dominate the upper levels of management, they in turn then tend to hire others who are like themselves. This tendency to like someone who is similar to us is known as “in-group preference.”

Analysis

Copy the following organizer into your notebook and complete the required information. Think carefully about how each group is depicted or portrayed in Canadian society.

| Group or identifying feature | Depiction in books or print media | Depiction in TV, movies, or other visual images |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Homosexuals | | |
| Asians | | |
| Blacks | | |
| Muslims | | |
| Aboriginal groups | | |
| Women in non-traditional roles | | |
| Men in non-traditional roles | | |
| Women in traditional roles | | |
| Men in traditional roles | | |

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Activity: A Multicultural Code of Conduct

Did you know . . .

The Canadian Air Transport Security Authority recently suspended a Muslim woman who lowered the length of her official uniform skirt because she wanted to protect her modesty and not show as much of her legs.

Background

In January 2007, the Quebec town of Hérouxville passed a set of "standards" aimed at immigrants. The town council claimed that the standards were designed to help immigrants decide whether or not moving to Hérouxville would be a good decision. Many Canadians were offended by the standards. These Canadians believed the standards to be racist and were concerned that they will have a negative impact on immigrants and all Canadians from visible minority groups.

The standards include the following statements:

- We consider that men and women are of the same value.
- We listen to music, we drink alcoholic beverages in public or private places, we dance.
- At the end of every year we decorate a tree with balls and tinsel and some lights.
- In our hospitals . . . woman doctors can treat men and women and the same for the men doctors. This same principle applies for nurses, firemen and women, ambulance technicians.
- In our schools the children cannot carry any weapons real or fake, symbolic or not.
- In many of our schools no prayer is allowed. We teach more science and less religion.
- In our public swimming pools we have men and women lifeguards for our security to protect us from drowning, don't be surprised this is normal for us.
- You may not hide your face as to be able to identify you while you are in public. The only time you may mask or cover your face is during Halloween. . . . All of us accept to have our picture taken and printed on our driver's permit, health-care card, and passports. A result of democracy.
- You will appreciate that both parents manage the children[s] needs and both have the same authority. The parents can be of the same race or not, be from the same country or not, have the same religion or not, even be of the same sex or not.

Source: Municipalité of Hérouxville. (January 2007). Publication of Standards. Available online at <http://municipalite.herouxville.qc.ca/Standards.pdf>

Your Task

In a small group, generate a Multicultural Code of Conduct. This Code should be designed to reflect important Canadian values and beliefs and should be written in positive language that celebrates diversity. Your Code should make immigrants feel excited to be part of Canada, rather than ashamed or embarrassed by their own cultural traditions.

To get started, you might choose to rewrite each of the Hérouxville standards reprinted above. You might also choose to visit the complete Publication of Standards document at <http://municipalite.herouxville.qc.ca/Standards.pdf>.

Once you have addressed the Hérouxville document, add a number of your own "standards" that you believe best describe multicultural Canada.