

18-10-16

Chantal Hérbert

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2016/10/18/canadas-diversity-model-should-be-defended-not-denounced-hbert.html>

**Canada’s diversity model should be defended, not denounced: Hébert**

We can’t fear the divisive debate it might spark

OTTAWA—Here is a much abbreviated list of the current and former Canadian politicians who believe that when it comes to cultural diversity, Canada should be exporting its live-and-let-live model, not looking for inspiration from countries such as France that have put in place coercive measures to affirm their national identity.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau sees cultural diversity as one of the great strengths of modern-day Canada. From his perspective, the Canadian identity is a fluid work in progress, not a static feature in need of proactive measures to ensure its preservation. He thinks of it as a living tree, not a dried flower stuck between two pages of history.

The prime minister is convinced that Canada’s cultural diversity enriches and renews its fabric. On that basis, Trudeau abhors, among other coercive measures, the notion of submitting prospective immigrants to a cultural correctness test.

As it happens, so does his Conservative vis-à-vis Rona Ambrose. She finds the notion that a government could appoint itself as the arbiter of collective values impracticable. With the notable exception of Kellie Leitch, who champions the idea of vetting the values of newcomers to this country, those who would succeed Stephen Harper are similarly disinclined to go down that road.

In their days as Quebec and federal ministers of the environment, Thomas Mulcair and Stéphane Dion found much to disagree on. As NDP leader, Mulcair emerged as the leading federalist critic of some of the features of Dion’s post-referendum clarity law. But on the worthiness of Canada’s inclusive model, they are on the same page.

Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne is sold on the merits of cultural diversity. So are Tory leader Patrick Brown and his NDP opposition counterpart Andrea Horwath. Over in Alberta, Jason Kenney, the former immigration minister who is seeking to reunite the right in that province, spent his federal career of reaching out to Canada’s diverse communities.

As mayors go, Montreal’s Denis Coderre, Toronto’s John Tory and Calgary’s Naheed Nenshi have very different styles, but they have in common a conviction that cultural diversity is key to the success of their respective big cities. On this, they speak the same language.

In Quebec, Premier Philippe Couillard gets flak for what his critics describe as a blind devotion to Canada’s multicultural model. He does seem to believe the best discussion of immigration is no discussion at all. And yet on notions such as a ban on the wearing of burqas and niqabs in public or the screening of the values of would-be immigrants, Couillard finds himself in the same camp as former PQ premier Lucien Bouchard, former Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe . . . and Quebec’s iconic bard, Gilles Vigneault. None of them see Quebec’s collective identity as an either/or proposition.

This is not an exhaustive list, but it is an eclectic one.

And yes, it includes most of what one could describe as the country’s political elite. Canada’s federal, provincial and municipal leaders do sit at the top of the pyramid. But it is voters that put them there.

All this is to say that Canada should embrace rather than brace for a challenge to its immigration and integration model.

It is not as if the discussion is going to go away just because it has the potential to be divisive.

This is a debate that already invited itself in the last Quebec and federal elections.

If anything, the refusal of many proponents of Canada’s approach to cultural diversity to argue for it on its merits only weakens their case.

One cannot simultaneously set Canada up as a model to the world and refuse to defend the country’s approach to cultural diversity at home for fear of shattering the societal consensus that sustains it.

In the late ’80s, the Reform party threw down the gauntlet at the supporters of official bilingualism. Preston Manning believed he could tap in to the frustrations of a silent (unilingual) majority.

The Reformers’ opponents castigated them for calling for a debate on Canada’s language policy. This is a boat — they said — that no responsible politician should want to rock.

And yet the discussion the Reform party forced on its rivals ended up strengthening Canada’s linguistic duality.

In time, Manning lost his leadership in no small part because he was unable to become bilingual enough to campaign efficiently in French — and unable to convince enough Canadians that it should not matter.