

ENCUENTROS



*Bringing the Rainbow
into the House:
Multiculturalism in Canada*

Lecture by

Roch Carrier

IDB CULTURAL CENTER

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BRINGING THE RAINBOW INTO THE HOUSE: MULTICULTURALISM IN CANADA

Roch Carrier

Thank you very much for your kind introduction. On the plane today, I began thinking about where I come from. I grew up in French-speaking Quebec, near the border of Maine. Behind our house was a little garden, and after that, the forest. At night we could see lights far away, and my father would say it was New York City. I think he believed it.

I am happy to see the IDB Executive Director of Canada, Mr. Marcel Massé, here. I remember hearing his lectures, and how impressed we were as students. Thank you for being here. In the gallery, I also met Lida Moser, who is a great photographer. Some 30 years ago, we produced a book together, *Québec à l'année 50*. Find it in your library, the photographs are superb.

My lecture is titled "Bringing the Rainbow into the House." I was not born into multiculturalism, of course. Very early in life, I wanted to become a writer, but it seemed unreal. I didn't know any Canadian writers; all the writers I knew about had beards, and were dead. Then by

chance, I read a story about fishing—not about cafes or Paris, like our French books. The story was about rivers, about trout. It was a short story by Hemingway. To many writers of my generation, Hemingway was not a grandfather, but a father. A bit later, I discovered J.D. Salinger, and I read his stories word by word, going through the dictionary. Sometimes it was frustrating when the words were not in my dictionary.

So eventually I became a writer. Still, I didn't want to spend my days writing, for that grows dull. I wanted to do something, but what do writers do? A friend, Gaston Minon, told me that in some countries like Chile and Mexico, writers were involved in politics. Writers could become national librarians, like Borges in Argentina, or diplomats, like Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz.

So here I am, and thanks to those influences, I am having a great life. I know it's possible to write about what you know, about trout or hunting, about your experience. You don't have to sit in front of a

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paper or a computer all day. You can be, and should be, involved in life.

Another important experience for me was living in Paris at Cité Universitaire. On this campus there are national houses for students of many countries. So as a young French Canadian, I found myself living between the United States House and Austria House. Peru was close by, and Brazil not far away, and I had friends from Africa—it was a wonderful experience. After that, I could never be comfortable with a kind of narrow nationalism. The world is a beautiful garden, and I like all the flowers.

Multiculturalism came slowly to Canada. When the Europeans, the French discoverers, first met the aboriginal peoples, they were not thinking in terms of multiculturalism. They wanted to convert them, turn them into French-speaking Roman Catholics. Or they wanted to fight them, for all kinds of reasons that don't exist any more.

There is a beautiful story told about Jacques Cartier, the explorer, during his first winter in Canada. Cartier and his men were near Quebec City, on the St. Lawrence River. From December until February, their boat was frozen over with twelve inches of ice; even the wine in barrels was freezing. Cartier's men were suffering from scurvy, and dying slowly of malnutrition. Their strength was decreasing, but they feared the aboriginals would attack and kill them all if they gave any sign of weakness. Finally Cartier had to explain to a chief that his men were dying, and the chief said, "Here, drink this." The drink was made from tree bark boiled in water, like a tea. Even though they feared it might be poison, some of the men

drank it, and they were cured.

Perhaps that was the first experience of multiculturalism: the French learning something from the aboriginals. They learned the art of war, as well. The French Canadians learned to hide, while the armies from France were still trying to fight in lines, which didn't work in the woods of Quebec.

To my family, multiculturalism came very late. My ancestors came in 1760, when *good* French people were there, and then *bad* English people started to arrive. What happens when people are afraid of strangers? They insult them. So my grandfather said, "Maudit anglais," and the Englishmen said, "God damned frogs." That was the only multicultural dialogue in my family, until my generation. And this year, it's amazing. When we celebrated the New Year together, the family members around the table represented Peruvian, Scottish, Korean, Jewish, and Chinese ancestry. Just a little family event.

Multiculturalism started slowly in Canada. For example, the flag of Montreal, which goes back about 122 years, shows the French fleur-de-lis, the English rose, the Irish shamrock, and the Scottish thistle; in fact, there was some cooperation between those four communities. By learning to live together in communities like Montreal and elsewhere, we developed a kind of tolerance and understanding. After the French and English-speaking peoples, then came communities that were not always welcome at the beginning. I believe that Canada was hard on the colored community and the Chinese people, who helped build the railroads. Then around 1950, after the world war ended and new economic growth had begun, Canadians began to

ask, who are we? We are next to a big country, the United States, some of us share the same language, the same television, films, and books—so what defines Canadians?

In 1969, a Royal Commission on Bilingualism was created, and it laid the foundation of what became our policy of multiculturalism: the concept of “one people, two official languages, many cultures,” bound together by tolerance, and respectful of differences. Maybe it’s idealistic and naïve, but it evolved with the population, allowing us to define ourselves. In 1971, after a blowup of French-speaking Quebec nationalism, Canada needed to overcome a kind of polarization. Based on the concept mentioned above, we continued to work together as a nation, and we were able to achieve a number of things, which I will discuss further.

In 1971 for the first time, Canada adopted a multicultural policy. Some of my intellectual friends in Quebec saw the politics of multiculturalism as a strategy to undermine Quebec nationalism. There were heated discussions about trying to “drown the French Canadian” in this sea of multiculturalism. After some years, we no longer heard that argument, because the population of Quebec changed, and became diversified and multicultural.

To strengthen that policy, we passed another law in 1985, known as Federal Employment Equity. This rule is to facilitate the employment of members of visible minorities, of aboriginal persons and disabled persons. One cannot say it is fully successful yet, but it’s working slowly, and the political will is behind that policy.

Three years later, in 1988, Canada passed the Multiculturalism Act. By this law, the federal government is working to achieve equality of all citizens—economic, social, and cultural equality—and participation in Canadian political life. The goal was that Canadian society would become more inclusive, and would be based on respect, equality and full participation, regardless of one’s color, religion, or background. And this is not fiction or oversized good will—it is continuous and persistent government policy. Even though the results aren’t always apparent, Canada is pushing toward those principles.

In the same direction, in 1991, Canada passed a broadcasting act. An organization like the CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Company] is absolutely essential, because the country is wide and its population is small and scarce. The CBC is like our circulation system. The law requires that CBC and the broadcasting system, through programming and employment opportunities, must serve the needs of a diversified society. Broadcasting should reflect the multicultural nature of Canada, not only in content but also in visibility. Before that, a white person like me would ask a minority person, “What do you think? and I will translate that for you.” But what the broadcasting act requires is that the minorities themselves tell who they are.

To this day, Canada’s multiculturalism policy is very much in effect, with the aim of fostering a society where people from all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging and attachment. Throughout Canada, we want civic participation. The government doesn’t want any partners who are alienated, who don’t have access

to the same privileges. We don't want pockets of our population feeling, "That's not for me, it's for the English-speaking, the French-speaking," or whatever. The government of Canada wants an equality of opportunity. And if there are Canadians who feel they don't belong or cannot participate in our society, the whole country will suffer.

I would like to illustrate this with three stories that are quite recent. Every fall, Canada presents what are called the Governor General Awards. The Governor General, the highest office in the country, gives awards for the best books. Among the winners this year was a young man who was born in Lebanon. He is one of our leading writers, and represents Canada in many theaters around the world. He said, "Because of Canada, I became a better Lebanese; and because I am a better Lebanese, I became a better Canadian." What did he mean exactly? He was expressing his feelings without a text and it was a very emotional moment. There was also an Ethiopian among the winners. In fact, two weeks ago, the Sunday *New York Times* gave his book a great review. He made the statement, "Thank you, Canada. I can do in this country what my father could not do in Ethiopia." The Governor General herself, Adrienne Clarkson, was born in Hong Kong, and was a tiny baby when her family arrived in Canada as refugees from World War II.

Let me add another story. Molson, a famous Canadian beer company, presents an annual arts award named the Molson Prize. Last fall, the chair of Canada Council, the equivalent of the National Endowment for the Arts, flew to the north and gave the most distinguished arts award to a sculptor by the

name of Kiawak Ashuna. Here, in the Cultural Center Art Gallery on exhibition today, is a very beautiful work of sculpture carved by Kiawak Ashuna.

My last story. After Canada's elections some weeks ago, the members of parliament were taking their oath of office. One was born in Grenada, and he invited the High Commissioner for Caribbean countries to the ceremony. Another member of parliament who belongs to the Sikh community took the oath on the *Guru Granth*, which is the sacred book of his religion. And I expect that my friend Herb Grey took the oath on the Hebrew Bible, all of which gives you some idea of our intentions. The principles may be vague, but here are concrete areas of accomplishment.

Canada believes that diversity is not a problem, it's a principle of the richness of nature. Supposing some manager had been in charge of creating the world, perhaps he would decide there could be only two types of bird, one that flies and one that doesn't, or two types of flowers, black and white. But nature has a law, and this law is diversity. If it works for nature, we believe it will work for Canada.

Let's consider some facts. Canada's population today is about 21 million, and 43% of us don't belong to the French, British or aboriginal communities. Our annual intake of immigrants is about 200,000; last year, it was 205,000. Immigration counts for 53% of our population growth. Five years ago our racial minority was 5% of the population; now it's 10%, and five years from now it will be 15%. One out of five workers belongs to an ethnic community, and two-thirds of the racial minority are under the age of 34. The aboriginal birth rate is three

times that of the Canadian population. One-third of the Canadians aged five to fifteen is either aboriginal or from a racial minority.

I spend quite a lot of time in offices and meetings. When I want to return to life, which happens about every third week, I visit a school. Part of my job is to promote reading, and I am curious: I want to know what's happening in the country. It's wonderful to see those kids sitting together in class, and the whites are not the majority. That tells us what will happen in the future, and what our challenges are. Those kids in second and third grade are beautiful to see. What can happen if they learn to share, to work as part of a team! It will be wonderful. So I see great hope there, whenever I visit those schools or libraries.

The bottom line is that the policy of multiculturalism brings social justice. We are building a nation that ensures fair and equitable treatment, and respects and accommodates people of all origins. Now we have a number of challenges, because we have built "the Canadian way of life." In fact, life in Canada is quite good, and you don't have to be privileged to have a decent life. Our challenge is to preserve this Canadian experience, and how do we balance that? How will this huge and varied population adapt to the Canadian way of life?

Of course, some will say it was simpler when we were all white. Some think it would be simpler if the French-speaking were not always complaining, or if we didn't have those English controlling everything. But we have to accommodate the reality of change.

Furthermore, globalization has changed the picture dramatically. In the

past, immigrants tended to adapt and join the new culture. Now, with communications and travel at such a rapid pace, immigrants don't immigrate, they simply move. And how do we accommodate that? A population moves away from somewhere, sometimes to escape troubles, but they want to keep something good from their country as well. How do we balance that?

We must create a Canada that is open. Keep the structures we know are good, and allow the new minorities the freedom to be themselves. At the same time, we must not single them out. No student should be prevented from becoming president of the class because of color, or the hat he wears. We want to create opportunities, and to do that, government supports a huge adaptation of public institutions.

The CBC is one example and the Canadian military forces are another. For a while I was principal of a military school. We were offering a great education, with a ratio of one teacher per student. We especially wanted to attract students from minority groups. That wasn't easy, because many were from countries where the father had been tortured by the military, where the military did terrible things. Once a minority student came to my office, and he was doing very well in school. I asked him, "Why are you here, what are your plans?" and he answered, "I want to learn and then return to my country and become the dictator." Not exactly the goal we had hoped for!

The second and third graders I mentioned will soon be making new demands on government. In ten years, they will be university students, and they will need support. Take my organization, for ex-

ample, the National Library of Canada. A student from Cameroon recently came to do some research. After viewing the library, she commented: "Monsieur, your collection is quite white." And it is. So the National Library has to provide multilingual and multicultural services. Many of the new students speak languages other than French and English, and we have to provide them with children's books. And their parents or grandparents, we have a duty to provide them with reading materials also. The government and all its institutions have some challenges ahead.

An organization like the Canada Council for the Arts, for example, has an obligation to serve the needs of aboriginal artists, as well as those artists from diverse communities. These artists should have the same access as those educated and disciplined in the established Canadian-European-American traditions. The Council supports storytelling festivals, because this is a means of expression, and it has supported a number of immigrant writers who enrich our literature. Through their books, we can gain a better understanding of the world.

The Council also has many and varied programs to support aboriginal artists. Last week, there was a meeting in our organization between aboriginal people and scientists to launch a project: to study the link between scientific observation of climate change and what is preserved in the memory of aboriginal language. In their language and mythology is knowledge that can help us understand climate change. A linguist told me that in one community, for example, there are many words to describe all kinds of ice, and different kinds of ice breaking. In this group, they will bring together different

kinds of knowledge and share all they learn from each other.

Mainstream commercial television and radio are also part of expressing this diversified population. Ethnic radio and television are thriving. We have a great many ethnic channels, and radio stations in numerous languages. There is even a fascinating aboriginal channel that I often watch. In terms of print and media, Toronto alone has more than 100 ethnic newspapers. Most arts organizations are now working toward bringing the rainbow under the roof. February is Black History month in Canada, when Black people tell about their experience in Canada. This policy of multiculturalism is not just about promoting the future. We cannot promote the future if we don't understand the past. We cannot promote higher values if we don't acknowledge that in the past, we sinned against tolerance.

Remember that multiculturalism means good will, and it is also good business; Canadians are very practical. When everyone is included, that means all this energy, different experience and knowledge flows into the Canada mainstream. This is good business. If people stay in touch with their countries, their languages, their cultures, then when we want to deal with foreign countries, we have those people to be ambassadors. That creates a lot of links, and lets other countries know that we respect their cultures.

It's been a pleasure talking to you, thank you very much.

Question: What languages are being taught to Canadian school children?

Answer: The two essential languages of Canada, French and English, are taught in school. On top of that, there are all kinds of

programs to support the teaching of a third or fourth language. Chinese, after English and French, is now the third most common language in Canada. The history of Canada has been one of adaptation to reality, to challenges. We shout at each other, but we don't fight. We accommodate, we negotiate; it's something we learned from the aboriginal peoples. In the future I would not exclude the possibility of three languages. At a seminar I attended in Cambridge, England, someone made the statement: "I would die if I could not speak my mother tongue." And an Indian replied, "Madame, if you die for one language, I should die five times!"

Question: What's the difference between American culture and Canadian culture?

Answer: This is quite a big one. All of us are influenced very deeply by American culture, no doubt about that. Why not? The American culture was developed by the most creative people in the world, and we are next door. I have the books, I hear the music, but our day-to-day experience and our past are different. The fabric of our society is also different, that's why I believe we are doing quite good things. Twenty years ago if someone in a university mentioned Canadian literature, there would probably be a big laugh. Now we have a number of great writers who are read in the United States, and the same with our musicians and films. Canada has a remarkable number of ethnic filmmakers working in new ways, opening new windows. Our film industry is a well-kept secret. Nobody sees those films because the industry in this country is so powerful, but we have jewels of movies in French and English.

Question: The Canadian example seems to be a more relevant model for some of the developing countries of the world, more so than the French, British or U.S. models. Do you agree, and how does Canada promote that around the world?

Answer: Yes, I agree that being open, accepting the differences, and seeing them as positive, might be of good use in other countries. You know, at the time "ethnic cleansing" was going on in Kosovo, about the same time Canada was giving a huge territory to the Inuit people. That became the territory of Nunavut, which now has self-government. I'm not saying the Inuit have had an easy life. There was a lot of hardship, and their people really suffered. But the problems did not end in conflict; on the contrary, it ended with the government of Canada opening a territory for them. I was there some days after the opening, and it was miraculous! Those people who had been pushed down by history suddenly had their own government. They were building their own parliament, they were opening their parliament library, Minister of Education, Minister of Fishing, Minister of Justice.

Some time later, I was in Vienna participating in a discussion about globalization with delegates from a number of countries, including Africa. The delegates from highly developed countries were talking about globalization as something flying very high. I had just arrived from Africa, where days before we had given some villagers a plow to be pulled by a horse. They celebrated that gift, and in the speeches they talked about "technology coming to the village"—because before that, they had only a wooden plow, pulled by women.

And in order for us to use our sophisticated computers, to send our emails, they had to close off power in another part of the city. So in Vienna, I said, I'm sorry, we cannot talk that way about globalization, because it is not happening everywhere in the world. There are a lot of inequities. So I raised the question, is globalization creating a different kind of imperialism?

I don't pretend to be a great authority on the subject, but after what I saw, I think there is a role for countries like Canada and the United States to prevent that kind of division from happening. As it is now, part of the world is rich, with lots of information and money, and part is completely poor, with no information and no money. There will be huge tension, and this cannot be the future of the world.

Thank you very much.

Roch Carrier

Roch Carrier was born in Sainte-Justine, Quebec in 1937. He received a BA (1957) from Saint-Louis University in Edmundston, New Brunswick; MA (1964) from the University of Montreal; and doctorate (1970) from the University of Paris.

In 1964, he joined the French Department of the Collège Militaire Royal de Saint-Jean (CMR), where he taught literature until 1970, and also taught at the University of Montreal (1970-1971). He was appointed secretary general of the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in 1971, and returned to CMR as director of the French Department (1973-1980). In 1986, he became dean of the Faculty of Administration and Humanities, and was appointed rector in 1990.

Several novels written by Mr. Carrier are considered classics and are used in schools and universities around the world, in both French and English. His plays have been produced both in Canada and abroad, and screenplays include *Le Martien de Noël* and *Le Chandail*.

Mr. Carrier has been active in such prestigious cultural organizations as the Canada Council for the Arts and the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, where he served on the board of directors for twelve years. He consulted with the Canadian Film Development Corporation for six years, and was the director of *Québec 10/10*, a collection of Quebec literature published in paperback by Stanké; he was also advisor to the Quebec Minister of Cultural Affairs.

Roch Carrier is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, an Officer of the Order of Canada, and a recipient of the Stephen Leacock Medal. He holds honorary doctorates from the University of Moncton in New Brunswick, York University in Toronto, Memorial University in Newfoundland and the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, Ontario.

From 1994 to 1997, he was director of the Canada Council for the Arts, after which time he turned his focus to travel, studying and writing. Mr. Carrier became Canada's fourth National Librarian on October 1, 1999.

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