

Muslims and multiculturalism: lessons from Canada

By Ehsan Masood,
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"What do you think of the debate in Britain about Muslims who live in communities of extended families and friends?"

I was asked this by a Canadian civil servant during a week-long visit to Canada in February 2007. Here is the gist of my reply: "It is not the business of the state to legislate individual housing decisions. People should be allowed to live where they want to. And the fact that someone decides to buy a house within walking-distance from a parent, or a five-minute drive from a sibling, doesn't make them a terrorist."

This response was a case of spectacular over-reaction. I had assumed that my Canadian questioner wanted to pursue a line of argument that says that people (read Muslims) who live in large communities are less integrated than those who do not. This is something that we hear in Europe all the time. Yet this is not at all what he meant. All he wanted to ask were my thoughts on the state of the British debate. My opinions on where people should live, he responded in a matter-of-fact-way, were the same as his own.

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For many of us in Europe, Canada is seen (even envied) as a society that is more at ease [1] with its increasing diversity. To be Canadian is to be a friend, a spouse, partner, colleague, or a neighbour with someone who is from a different background to your own, in an unthreatening atmosphere. There is little appetite to change the way anyone thinks or behaves. This is normal, as is being all of the above with someone who shares exactly the same history as your own. For the academic and business worlds, diversity is a source of talent and of innovative ideas. For politicians, what matters is not whether you speak French, English, Chinese or Arabic at home, but a desire to be a good citizen.

The emergence of al-Qaida [2] in the developed world and the discovery of low but consistent levels of support among Muslims for its particular brand of violent extremism is redefining two key aspects of the modern developed society: citizenship, and access to justice. Many of Europe's governments - especially those that have experienced acts of terror - believe that the terms governing them need to be tightened in order to defeat terrorism and hence preserve the freedoms that we currently enjoy.

Canada has been the site of terrorist [3] attacks before (notably from Québec separatists in 1969-70, Armenian anti-Turkish operatives in the 1980s, and Sikh separatists who blew up a Montreal-London flight [4] in mid-air in June 1985), though not as yet from the Osama bin Laden network. In June 2006, however, seventeen men of various origins (Arab, Pakistani, Somali and Caribbean) were arrested [5] in Toronto on terrorism-related offences after a year-long surveillance operation. Since those arrests (if not before), Canada's policymakers too have become concerned about possible support for al-Qaida among Muslim communities and have begun to think about policy responses [6]. They are also keenly studying developments elsewhere including the United States as well as Britain.

So far, however, the Canadian government has not sought to emulate its British counterparts in shaping policy towards the country's approximately 750,000 Muslims (the 2001 census figure [7] is 579,600, 2% of the population). The country's lawmakers seem to want remain faithful to their Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms [8] (1982) that is the basis for the modern Canadian state. One of the reasons for my visit was to ask journalists and policymakers why.

The same, but different

Compared with Europe, opinion polls suggest that Canadians are on the whole more contented with each other and with the fact that their vast country is fast becoming more diverse. English-speaking Canada in particular is more comfortable with immigration - which is much less of a contested issue, for political parties of both left and right in the way that it is elsewhere in developed countries, particularly Europe. "In Canada we are all immigrants, so immigration is not on the agenda", says Michael Adams [9], Canada's veteran pollster and author of the forthcoming book, *Unlikely Utopia: the Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism*.

One of the first things that grabs a visitor from Europe is the absence in Canada of an aggressive popular media. There is a tabloid press, but it concerns itself with the celebrity world, and the domain of the weird and the wacky. Canada's newsagents and supermarkets lack the familiar (to a visitor from Britain) sight of a long row of newspapers screaming alarmist headlines in capital letters that frequently exude scepticism (at least) and outright hostility (at most) towards people of non-western religions or new arrivals from other countries.

Furthermore, Canada's media (both popular and broadsheet) will not do anything to disturb the national consensus on diversity. So, for example, members of the Canadian far right, or Muslims who support violent extremists, will not automatically make the front pages, nor will they be invited to the top news shows as routinely happens in Britain. "We just don't do that kind of thing in Canada", says Nazim Baksh [10], an award-winning producer and filmmaker for the CBC, Canada's public-service broadcaster.

In part, perhaps, as a result of this consensus, the Canadian popular press is not particularly popular. Its readership is negligible compared to the tens of millions in Britain who read the tabloids. And this has one very important implication for public policy. It means that popular newspapers do not have the degree of influence enjoyed by their European (particularly British) counterparts. What the *Toronto Sun* says on any given day undoubtedly contributes to local and national debates: but it is one voice among many. Its perspective does not have undue influence among members of parliament and the civil service. They, in turn, do not feel the need to make policy to fit in with the perceived views of popular newspaper readers.

A Canadian debate

But Canada's policy community is eager to learn how other countries are responding to the al-Qaida threat - indeed they are closely looking at the United Kingdom, and contacts between

British and Canadian foreign offices remain close. What do they make of the UK response so far? As would be expected, views inside different government departments are decidedly mixed.

One successful British initiative, for example, is a project called the [Radical Middle Way](#) [11]. Here, some of the world's most respected Islamic scholars have been taken on lecture-tours that have attracted young people in the thousands. This idea was suggested by [Q-News](#) [12] magazine and the British Muslim student body, the Federation of Student Islamic Societies ([Fosis](#) [13]). It later found backing from inside the Whitehall governing elite.

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The project's proponents contend that a message of peace and goodwill will carry stronger resonance among the young if conveyed by "traditional" Islamic scholars. These are (invariably) men who can trace their scholastic pedigree to the time of the Prophet [Mohammed](#) [27]. What is attractive about this idea, particularly to British policymakers, is that the al-Qaida network's theology is not that of what is called "traditional Islam", but derives mostly from the many movements that arose partly in opposition to the traditionalists, such as the Salafis of Arabia. So the thinking inside the civil service can easily be imagined: if we can encourage young people to return to traditional Islam, they will be less likely to be attracted by the ideas of al-Qaida.

British and Canadian Muslims sympathetic to the traditional Islamic approach are vigorously lobbying the Canadian government to take its cue from Britain. However, Canada has not yet

made up its mind. Some officials appear keen, and are impressed at the organisers' ability to pull in big names such as Hamza Yusuf (which, in turn, generates large audiences). But others are more cautious.

One reason for this is the fact that the Canadian state does not want to be seen (at home and abroad) to be getting mired in Islamic theology, nor does it want to be seen to privilege one theological position over others. Another is the belief that getting young adults to attach themselves to Islamic scholars, while effective in the short run, does not in the long term help to prepare them to be confident and independent thinkers, able to take responsibility for their own decisions.

If anything, Canada has had a diversity of Islamic opinion for longer than Britain. As in Britain, Canada is home to Muslim organisations that originally started life as foreign offshoots of Islamism in the middle east and south Asia, or which were once strong supporters of the Iranian revolution of 1979. But in contrast to developments across the north Atlantic, Canada has a proactive and established national Muslim women's organisation in the shape of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women [28].

Canada is also home to the writer and activist Irshad Manji [29], whose bestseller *The Trouble With Islam Today* [30] is a passionate polemic that calls on Islamic scholars to at last acknowledge the rights of minorities such as the many gay and lesbian people who regard themselves as Muslims, and who want to be accepted as a part of the society in which they live.

In light of this range of views, it comes as no surprise to see that Canada (unlike many western European countries) does not have an official or semi-official Muslim Council, nor is there (at present) any attempt to establish a representative body that would want to act as an interlocutor between Muslims and the state. Muslim groups don't seem to want one, and neither does the state. Canada has been closely watching British developments in this area and the evidence points to one thing: representative organisations promoted by state authorities leads to messy politics and ultimately disjointed government.

The United Kingdom now has at least three claimants to the title of representative body: The Muslim Council of Britain [31] (MCB), the British Muslim Forum [32] and the Sufi Muslim Council [33]. Each comes to Islam from a different point on the theological spectrum. And, as so often happens in government-NGO relations, each is being promoted by a different government department or agency because such an association matches a particular political desire or point of view.

So, for example, Britain's foreign office supports [34] the Radical Middle Way project in an effort to counter extremism; the department of communities and local government promotes [35] the avowedly anti-Islamist Sufi Muslim Council because it takes the view that the majority of Muslims do not want to take their faith into politics. Yet at the same time, the office of the mayor of London, Ken Livingstone (a member of the country's governing Labour Party) remains close to the MCB and its affiliated Muslim Association of Britain (MAB [36]), in particular because of the MAB's association with the anti-globalisation left and support for Palestinian causes.

Looking at all of this from the perspective of Canada, it is easy to see why that country is content to watch and wait, rather than take any hasty steps that might prove counterproductive. It seems like an eminently sensible approach.

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