

Neil Bissoondath: Selling Illusions (1994)

Ethnicity

Divisiveness is a dangerous playmate, and few playgrounds offer greater scope for divisiveness than that of ethnicity. The walls are high, ready-made, as solid as obsession. Guard towers can be built, redoubts that allow defence and a distant view into the land of the other. Like all walls, they can be either accepted as integral to life or breached—dismantled brick by brick—as restrictive to it. How to view those walls, how or even if to deal with them, is a decision each individual must make.

For society at large, though, ethnicity and its walls must be barriers to nothing. No opportunity must be denied, no recognition withheld, no advancement refused. Neither, however, must ethnicity be claimed as grounds for opportunity, recognition or advancement. Tempting though it may be, a multicultural society can ill afford the use of past discrimination as justification for future recrimination. It is essential, in such a society, that discrimination be permissible only on the basis of knowledge and ability. To do otherwise—to discriminate, for instance, against white males as a class because of transgressions by other white males in the past—is to employ the simplistic eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth philosophy implicit in arguments supportive of capital punishment. There is an element of class vengeance to it, an element of self-righteousness, that offers victims or their descendants the opportunity to strike back. It is like arguing that the victims of torture must be allowed to torture their torturers. Redress is important, but the nature of that redress is even more so, for it sets the tone for the future. Yesterday cannot be changed, but tomorrow is yet to be shaped, and ways must be found to avoid creating resentments today that might lead to upheavals tomorrow. As Nelson Mandela has made clear, a peaceful and prosperous future for a multi-racial South Africa cannot be secured through punitive action for the wrongs of the past; it can be attained only through the full recognition of human dignity

implicit in the acceptance of equality.

Economic and social imbalance cannot be redressed overnight. Only revolution can effect so radical a change, and if there is a lesson to be learned from the history of the twentieth century it is that revolutionary change is illusory: it merely changes oppressors and the nature of oppression. True and lasting change, then, cannot be imposed; it must come slowly, growing with experience, from within.

The comment was once made that racism is as Canadian as maple syrup. History provides us with ample proof of that. But perspective requires the notation that racism is also as American as apple pie, as French as croissants, as Indian as curry, as Jamaican as Akee, as Russian as vodka... It's an item on every nation's menu. Racism, an aspect of human virulence, is exclusive to no race, no country, no culture, no civilization. This is not to excuse it. Murder and rape, too, are international, multicultural, innate to the darker side of the human experience. But an orderly and civil society requires that the inevitable rage evoked not blind us to the larger context. [...]

True racism is based, more often than not, on wilful ignorance and an acceptance of and comfort with stereotype. We like to think, in this country, that our multicultural mosaic will help nudge us into a greater openness. But multiculturalism as we know it indulges in stereotype, depends on it for a dash of colour and the flash of dance—and that in itself is not a bad thing. But such an approach fails to address the most basic questions people have about each other: Do those men doing the Dragon Dance really all belong to secret criminal societies? Do those women dressed in saris really coddle cockroaches for luck? Do those people in dreadlocks all smoke marijuana and live on welfare in between criminal acts? Such questions do not seem to be the concern of multiculturalism in Canada. Far easier is indulgence in the superficial and the exhibitionistic.

Community response to racism, while important, must also be measured, responsible. We must beware the self-appointed activists who seem to pop up in the media at every given opportunity, spouting the rhetoric of retribution, mining distress for personal, political and professional gain. We must beware those who depend on conflict for their sense of self: the non-whites who need to feel themselves victims of racism, the whites who need to feel themselves purveyors of it. We

must be certain that in addressing the problem we do not end up creating it. I do not know if the Miss Black Canada Beauty Pageant still exists, but it is my fervent hope that it does not. Not only are beauty contests in themselves offensive, a racially segregated one is even more so. What would public reaction be, I wonder, if every year television offered a broadcast of a Miss White Canada Beauty Pageant? There are community-service awards given exclusively to blacks: would we be comfortable with such awards given exclusively to whites? If we accept a racially exclusive conference for non-white writers, should we not also accept one for white writers? Quebec offers the Association of Black Nurses, the Association of Black Artists, the Congress of Black Jurists. Replace Black with White and watch the dancing visions of apartheid. It is inescapable that racism for one is racism for the other.

It is vital, also, that we beware of abusing the word itself. Let us be certain that we apply it only when it is merited. Doing so not only avoids a harmful backlash but also ensures that we do not empty the word of meaning, that we do not constantly cry wolf by seeing racism as rampant and systemic, and so drain it of emotional potency. “Racism” remains a dirty word in Canada. It must be kept that way.

The Tolerant Society

In a radio interview, the novelist Robertson Davies once spoke of the difference between two words that are often—and erroneously—used interchangeably: acceptance and tolerance.

Acceptance, he pointed out, requires true understanding, recognition over time that the obvious difference—the accent, the skin colour, the crossed eyes, the large nose—are mere decoration on the person beneath. It is a meeting of peoples that delves under the surface to a knowledge of the full humanity of the other.

Tolerance, on the other hand, is far more fragile, for it requires not knowledge but wilful ignorance, a purposeful turning away from the accent, the skin colour, the crossed eyes, the large nose. It is a shrug of indifference that entails more than a hint of condescension.

The pose of tolerance is seductive, for it requires no effort; it is benign in that it allows others to get on with their lives free of interference—and also free of a helping hand. The problem, of course, is that

tolerance—based as it is on ignorance—can, with changing circumstances, give way to a perception of threat. And such a perception is all that is required to cause a defensive reaction to kick in—or to lash out. Already in this country, we are seeing the emergence of reaction from those who feel themselves and their past, their beliefs and their contribution to the country, to be under assault. People who are “put up with” in the good times assume aspects of usurpers in the bad. Notions of purity—both cultural and racial—come to the forefront as the sense of self diminishes under the assault of unemployment, homelessness, a growing sense of helplessness.

This tolerance can very quickly metamorphose into virulent defensiveness, rejecting the different, alienating the new. Understanding, in contrast, requires effort, a far more difficult proposition, but may lead to acceptance and, for the newcomers, a sense of belonging. Multiculturalism, with its emphasis on the easy and the superficial, fosters the former while ignoring the latter.

Canada has long prided itself on being a tolerant society, but tolerance is clearly insufficient in the building of a cohesive society. A far greater goal to strive for would be an *accepting* society. Multiculturalism seems to offer at best provisional acceptance, and it is with some difficulty that one insists on being a full—and not just an associate—member of society. Just as the newcomer must decide how best to accommodate himself or herself to the society, so the society must in turn decide how it will accommodate itself to the newcomer. Multiculturalism has served neither interest; it has heightened our differences rather than diminished them; it has preached tolerance rather than encouraging acceptance; and it is leading us into a divisiveness so entrenched that we face a future of multiple solitudes with no central notion to bind us. [...]