S OPINION tuesday, 20 march, 2007

Solving Canada's identity crisis, in 200 words or less

Should Canada continue with its cultural mosaic, or is it time to move on to the American melting pot? Our panel breaks it down



STAFE

Group

The ideal makeup of our culture has always been a point of contention, with Canada subscribing to the "cultural mosaic" version as opposed to the American-style melting pot.

While this was officially enacted in 1988 as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, the notion of an official multicultural act was first introduced in 1971 by Pierre Trudeau, and can even be traced back to 1947's Canadian Citizenship Act.

Not everyone agrees with the mosaic theory, however, and our impromptu panel of cultural commentators is here to help. From melting pots to bowls of soup, we present you with an array of tasty alternatives along with the status quo.

Michael Iara

I for one have never had a definite cultural identity—not that I particularly want one either. I find the whole mess really sticky. The nationalism and flags and customs and cultural bonds that go along with it have, from the beginning of human history, caused much strife and war. Ethnicity has always been an excuse to justify expansionism, imperialism and genocide. Whether it's tension between Latinos

and Blacks in a Californian neighbourhood, crimes in Rwanda against the Tutsis or turf wars between ethnic gangs in Toronto, our cultural differences do more harm than good.

For all these reasons, a cultural melting pot is better than a mosaic. They give different cultures the opportunity to recognize the humanity in each other—as they meld together, they become a part of each other.

My parents are from two different countries, and I've found that through the coming together of their families in me, more has been gained than lost. New ideas, new customs and new ways of looking at things steam up from the pot. After all, you can never make a cake by separating the ingredients: you've got to mix them up.

Paul Knoechel

I feel a great swell of Canadian pride when walking around campus. I can see people from dozens of different backgrounds, speaking numerous languages, each contributing to the great cultural mosaic of which they're a part. They're all contributing to Canadian culture, regardless of whether they mean to or not. That's why the fabric works, even if people claim it doesn't.

Despite charges that immigrants come here and don't feel Canadian, which undermines the tapestry of Canada's cultural makeup, they're still part of the mosaic. Culture isn't a static thing—it evolves with the various cultural backgrounds of which it's made. Interacting with all those around us, as well as the institutions,

businesses, communities and everything else a culture is built upon, you're part of the mosaic whether you like it or not.

I don't feel bad for our culture if people don't want to integrate with it. I do feel bad for these individuals though: it's just like going to a huge party and sitting in the corner talking with the two other people you know.

Maria Kotovych

In the US, all ethnic groups assimilate into one American national identity. Yet since 9/11, we have seen that not all Americans in the melting pot are created equal. Muslim-Americans in particular have been singled out, racially profiled and held in prisons without just cause—all under the guise of the unfortunately named USA PATRIOT Act. This shows us that the melting pot is more theory than reality for our southern neighbours.

In Canada, Anglo-Canadians have historically instituted ethnocentric assimilation policies on non-British immigrants and Aboriginals, all in the hope of achieving an American-style melting pot. However, the "Canadian identity" these people wished to impose was essentially Anglo-Protestant culture. If other groups were expected to stop identifying with their ancestral homeland and become "Canadian," the Anglos should have done the same; creating a "Canadian identity" that just replicated Britishness was hypocritical.

A multicultural mosaic, Canada's current approach, is much better. Canadians who still connect with their

ethnic roots enrich our country's cultural life, and the multiculturalism policy recognizes this. Many Canadian citizens, while being proud Canadians, are also proud of, and interested in, their ancestral homeland's history, language and culture—I know I am. It would be ridiculous for Canada to assume that these cultural and linguistic expressions are meaningless to its citizens.

Robb Myroon

While it pains me to concede that the United States is better than Canada in any regard, they're definitely going in the right direction with this whole melting-pot thing. Currently, Canada's culture is defined as a cultural "mosaic." The idea being that each culture has its own flavour, so to speak, that it brings to the recipe in order to create a burst of deliciousness, all without compromising its original taste.

This idea is alright until you find yourself as a tomato hanging out with a bunch of bananas. Not exactly a pretty picture, or a pretty taste for that matter. We've seen time and again that enforcing differences between ethnic groups only creates disagreements that often culminate in violence.

Melting every culture into one is a better idea, creating a sense of unity and national pride among people of diverse backgrounds. The less pronounced our differences are from each other, the more peace and harmony can be achieved.

Kelsey Tanasiuk

Let's face it: the mosaic metaphor really doesn't fit the complexity of Canada's multicultural system. A mosaic is a bunch of little tiny bits of broken glass all cemented together—yet it's by this poorly constructed bit of imagery that some would have you believe everyone in Canada clings to their ancestry and never comes in contact with any other cultures. Obviously a major metaphoric overhaul is needed here, so I offer you the Vegetable Soup Theory.

You've got your chunks of vegetables, each of them with a unique flavour and nutritional content to offer—these are our many different cultures, if you're slow to catch on. Next is the broth, the unifying force keeping the soup together as a whole and taking on the flavours of the vegetables. This broth is the generations that follow the vegetable chunks, slowly being assimilated and at the same time holding everything together.

But Canadian multiculturalism is like a botched vegetable soup: sometimes creepy slimy stuff develops, and sometimes things boil to the surface. As a fourth-generation Ukrainian-Canadian myself, I'm one of those creepy things. My parents are rather brothy, assimilated for the most part, but then came me. Interested in my heritage, I speak the language and strive to learn more about the culture. Although I'm very much part of the broth, I'm also a unique ingredient—something that no one really wants to investigate.

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