

Multiculturalism & Multicultiphobia

Do you have anxiety of losing English Canada?
Then it is time for a dialogue

Interview with **Phil Ryan**, author of *Multicultiphobia*, and associate professor at Carleton University

Interview & photos by **Myungsook Lee**



Summary of *Multicultiphobia*

What do Multiculturalism critics say?

Multiculturalism generates ghettos and divided loyalties.

Most newcomers can now easily preserve and enhance their cultures by themselves. Multiculturalism pushes all Canadians into separate boxes. Many multicultural groups don't practise multiculturalism. They practise what can best be described as mono-culturalism. Multiculturalism invents a duty not to merge with the Canadian mainstream (Neil Bissoondath *Selling Illusions*, Richard Gwyn *Nationalism without Walls*).

Multiculturalism is a cult.

Anyone critical of multicultural polity is immediately branded a racist. Minorities who feel disadvantaged are allowed to speak out, but majorities are not. Members of the majority who disagree with any minority claim will be labelled racists or bigots. (Neil Bissoondath).

Multiculturalism encourages frozen identities and separation.

Multiculturalism is an article of faith for politicians of all stripes and for educators. It must be defended and protected, and whatever threatens it must be rooted out, even if that threat is the teaching of Canadian history. Canadians try to demonstrate to themselves and the world that we are a deeply racist society. (Jack Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?*).

Since the announcement of the 2031 outlook on population by Stats Canada: About one - third of Canada's population will be a visible minority by 2031 and anxiety has been expressed in the media. DIVERSE is very interested in reviewing *Multicultiphobia* because of its timely response to this complicated issue of Multiculturalism. We believe the book has very comprehensive analysis of the comments from critics. And it helps us understand the debate on multiculturalism.

This book will be beneficial, not only to those who are in academic fields, but also those in practical areas such as media, cultural institutes, art centres and parliaments.

In the interview with Phil Ryan, author of *Multicultiphobia* and associate professor at Carleton University, we ask him about the comments and reviews from readers about the book including *Vancouver Sun*'s columnist Douglas Todd and University of Toronto Professor Jeffery G. Reitz. We also want him to expand on questions we raise.

We believe that it has a significant role in increasing the momentum of constructive dialogue about multiculturalism issues.

But there's also been another reaction: some people who have not read the book are very angry about its title. One posting on the *Globe and Mail* web site, for example, complained that the title dismisses anyone who questions "politically-correct orthodoxy" as a "Racist hick."

I am interested in how your readers have been responding to your book, *Multicultiphobia*, since you published it on June 2010.

I've heard from many readers who tell me they enjoyed the book. One professor using it for a course told me that the book was sparking good debates in her classroom, which I was particularly pleased to hear.

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The problem is not that many Canadians, including some political leaders and influential people in the media, dislike multiculturalism. The problem is that they attack it in such an indiscriminate and extreme way that it is difficult to have a serious discussion about the challenges we face.

The assumption seems to be that I am claiming that all opposition to multiculturalism is a bit crazy. That's not my argument at all, but I can understand how the title might lead to that interpretation.

You say in your introduction that the book is "an exercise in listening to multicultiphobia." Why did you choose the word "phobia"?

A phobia is an irrational fear. But this fear may be of something that is in fact potentially dangerous. Let's say you suffer from acrophobia, fear of heights. Well, being careless in high places is certainly very dangerous. The problem with a phobia, though, is it can prevent you from dealing constructively with dangers and challenges: watch someone with acrophobia in a high place, and you realize their fear makes them more likely to hurt themselves, not less.

In the same way, the problem is not that many Canadians, including some political leaders and influential people in the media, dislike multiculturalism. The problem is that they attack it in such an indiscriminate and extreme way that it is difficult to have a serious discussion about the challenges we face. And this, like acrophobia, can create new dangers. Thus, the knee-jerk assumption of many critics that things like the so-called "Toronto eighteen" plot should be blamed on multiculturalism, could lead us to change our policies in ways that create more serious problems for Canadian society.

Jeffrey G. Reitz, a Professor of Ethnic, immigration and Pluralism Studies at the University of Toronto, pointed out that "Ryan tends to dismiss immigrants' problems as not being the fault of multiculturalism, and this gets in the way of assessing their significance, or what should be done about them if multiculturalism as it stands is not enough. Opportunities to improve policy are missed."



**Could you share your comments with us?**

Reitz manifests that very old dream of many policy analysts, to "win a place at the decision table." Analysts should comprise an elite caste that offers up "policy improvements" to political leaders. But I believe that durable and just policies can only emerge and be sustained by ongoing dialogue among citizens. Before that can happen on issues surrounding multiculturalism, however, a lot of misconceptions must be cleared out of the way.

Many critics of multiculturalism, for example, blame it for fostering the rise of "ethnic ghettos." My book uses a variety of evidence to show that this claim is simplistic. This certainly does not mean that I "dismiss" the challenges of immigrant integration, as Reitz claims. I take those challenges very seriously, and believe we can only talk about them when we get beyond the simplistic rhetoric of many critics.

In the interview with EMBASSY, Canada's Foreign Policy Newspaper, you said that you were disappointed because you found that the media reports on multiculturalism between 2006, 2007 and 2009 didn't differ from those in 1993-1994. What would you suggest to make media reflect diverse voices? I've heard that media should be composed of people with diverse backgrounds, especially in the area of editorial. Do you agree?

The newsroom, like any workplace today, should reflects the diversity of our society. Yet I don't believe that diversity in itself would do much to address the problem identified in the book. Many newspaper columnists and editorial writers today seem to feel no need or obligation to learn, to grow. The same declarations are made year after year; answers to those declarations are carefully ignored. Until that behaviour changes, I can't see the media progressing much in its handling of difficult issues. If columnists simply parrot the same tired old claims about multiculturalism, the ethnic background of the parrot probably doesn't matter much.

PHOTO LEFT North Vancouver, British Columbia



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Douglas Todd, Spirituality and Diversity Columnist from the *Vancouver Sun* said "Ryan doesn't show any empathy for those Canadians who wind up on the financial losing end of the country's immigration policies." But we also see lots of immigrants who are highly educated and experienced in their countries but are employed in lower level workplaces in Canada. Is it the problem of the immigration policy?

The book is about how we're to live together as Canadians from many backgrounds. It really does not address the question of how wide we should open our doors for others, and how we should select others to come and join us. I know it sounds funny to separate those issues,

because there are many connections between them. But they really are very different issues. So the book says very little about aspects of immigration policy that are hotly debated today: "how many?" and "who?"

But on the matter of empathy for native-born Canadians and for under-employed immigrants: the book repeatedly expresses my desire for a just and more egalitarian society. I believe that our ability to live well together is much more threatened by income polarization than by the diversity of our backgrounds or religious beliefs. In a just society, anyone on the "losing end" should still be able to live a decent and meaningful life.

Have you ever had a chance to look at the recent *Globe and Mail* articles on Multiculturalism debates (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/time-to-lead/multiculturalism>)?

I followed the *Globe* coverage carefully, and I was also the guest 'expert' for their first on-line discussion on the topic. After several days of interesting exchanges, I was astonished that the paper summed up the debate with an editorial saying that we should simply give up any hope of having intelligent discussions on the topic and "strike multiculturalism from the national vocabulary." For one reason or another, the *Globe*'s editorial board has retreated into a fantasyland in which we can avoid our challenges and problems by fiddling with vocabulary.

PHOTO ABOVE Richmond, British Columbia

NEXT PAGE Surrey, British Columbia



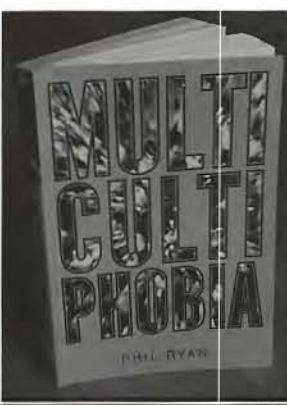
I think you concluded your book positively saying "we can build a multicultural society that is also a good society." Yet you also present preceding conditions as "if we are brave enough and persistent enough and generous enough". What was your biggest self learning or awareness through your research for this book?

While working on the book, I came to be very appreciative and even proud of something that millions of ordinary Canadians are trying to do, often in the face of ridicule and misunderstanding from media elites: to build a new way of living together, to arrive at a relaxed and welcoming understanding of our national identity.

But I also grew to be very fearful for the future of our country, because I believe that much of what we have achieved can easily be swept away, that perhaps we may lose the "bravery, persistence and generosity" we need to build a just and diverse society.

I continue to wonder whether our hopes and dreams are strong enough to conquer our phobias. 

We welcome your comments and letters to the editor. Please send them to editor@diversemagazine.ca



Summary of *Multicultiphobia*

What questions must address the shared-values approach which is the basic need for a social cohesion (successful Multicultural society)?

- Which exactly are the values that must be shared?
- At what level of specificity must they be shared?
- What are we asking of immigrants: Do as we say, or do as we do?
- How are shared values to be inculcated? Can we avoid an authoritarian approach to the promotion of those values?