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Getting at the roots of multicultural animosity

At the beginning of March, an Egyptian woman new to Canada filed a human-rights complaint against the province of Quebec after the government and her school told her to remove her niqab.

Around the same time, a new report released by Statistics Canada showed that about one-third of Canada's population will be a visible minority by 2031. The country's foreign-born population is expected to rise to 28 per cent, four times faster than the rest of the population. Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans are expected to make up the largest visible minority group.

And most recently, a poll commissioned by the CBC showed that Aboriginals and Muslims are the frequent targets of discrimination in Canada.

It's in this context that Phil Ryan, associate professor in the School of Public Policy and Administration at Carleton University, is exploring the criticisms surrounding multiculturalism in his new book *Multicultiphobia*, due to hit shelves on May 1. Mr. Ryan argues that much of the multiculturalism criticism is in fact marred by important errors of fact and interpretation.

Embassy spoke with Mr. Ryan this week, and the following is an edited transcript of that conversation:

Why did you decide to write this book?

"Let me go back 30 years. I went hitchhiking in Eastern Canada for a couple of months and I was struck by how many times, once you went into Atlantic Canada, you hear stories like the following: 'My dad doesn't talk to my sister anymore because we're a Catholic family and she married a Protestant boy.' I was really struck by that because it told me how deep that division had run in Canada.

"Now we fast-forward to early-'90s, when I started reading a couple of books on multiculturalism. I read that Canada used to be united, we used to know who we were and then multiculturalism came along and made us emphasize our divisions. I thought: 'That's a fantasy because it doesn't fit with the Canada I grew up in, which has always had its divisions.'

"As we entered this new decade, I noticed that the same type of writing and arguments kept popping up in op-ed pages, new books kept coming up with the same theme—I noticed that continuity. That is when I decided to sit down and research it in more depth."

How did you come up with the title of the book and what does it signify?

"When I put the different criticisms of multiculturalism together, it struck me that behind the surface complaints, there was just a deep anxiety that perhaps wasn't expressed very clearly by many critics. If you are a critic of multiculturalism, it doesn't mean you have a phobia for multiculturalism, but many influential books that were being cited in Parliament and the media did strike me to be phobic."

You wrote that these critics have actually identified some multiculturalism issues that we as Canadians need to talk about. What are those issues?

"A fairly obvious one is how do we hold together as a society? What binds us together? A lot of the critics have talked about the need for shared values, though they find it difficult to pin down just what those values might be. Another issue is where do we get our ethics from? How do we re-negotiate that as our society and our world changes?

"One of the things critics keep saying is that multiculturalism brought a runaway relativism in which anything goes. I don't think that's true, but I do think we need to become much more skilled in talking about our different understanding of norms. Take the example of the student in Quebec. Some people get very worried about this, as if this is a terrible thing that we're having a disagreement on this. Well it's not. It's another thing we need to talk about as society changes."

You also look at multiculturalism before and after Sept. 11, 2001. Why is that?

"The question there was how much really did change in the way we talk about and understand multiculturalism. It certainly is an important event in recent history. In the specific case of multiculturalism, it led a lot of writers to say that perhaps multiculturalism is a security threat to Canada and other countries. But a lot of people who published after 2001, where did they go? They didn't go to the policy to look at it, or to any new reports on multiculturalism. They went to the books published in the 1990s to find out what the policy was. And that is a bit too much continuity, really."

You based much of your analysis on different books and media reports. What role do you think the media has in advancing the debate on multiculturalism and also influencing the public on this issue?

"That's a very good question. I guess I got a little disappointed, and certainly in the study I am seeing some of the same arguments being trotted out in 2006, 2007, 2009 that I was reading in 1993, 1994. That is particularly disappointing for op-ed columns, where the learning curve of some writers is flat. They are not listening to any responses to their criticisms, so there's no real debate for those people. This means we are picking at the same things and having the same discussions.

"Because of that, the media is not able to progress in identifying new issues that are perhaps more fruitful and can lead us forward in the debate. If you keep hearing that year after year multiculturalism leads people to separate themselves from Canadian society, it celebrates difference but not togetherness, too many immigrants are wandering off and separating themselves from Canadian society—well, there's lots of answers to those arguments. So why not take up the answer?"

What is your own view about Canada's multiculturalism?

"My view is generally quite positive. Our society has changed a lot in its ethnic composition over the last 30 years. Many other societies have changed as well. We seem much more relaxed about that than many countries, for example in Western Europe. We seem much more optimistic about that and that impresses me. And I think that broadly reflects Canadians' appreciation of multiculturalism.

"On a broad level, and I don't mean every single policy or source or funding, we'll try to understand people from other countries, not simply say 'look, this is the way it's done here, there's no discussion,' that we will adapt in some areas and try to put our fingers on what's really important for us, where don't want to change and where we should change. I think it's very healthy that we're—by and large—able to do that here. "

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