

Our great national itch: debating multiculturalism

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On February 11, 2011, *Globe and Mail* columnist John Ibbitson warned that “Whether we like it or not - and there’s not much to like - events could force a national debate on whether multiculturalism is working in Canada.” One of the two triggering events to which Ibbitson pointed occurred in Winnipeg, where

a dozen newly-arrived families are demanding from the public school board that their children be exempted from compulsory classes in music and phys-ed, claiming that music and mixing genders are forbidden in their interpretation of Islam.

This is a provocative snippet, to be sure, one that will lead many readers to ask: But why did they come to Canada in the first place?

The reaction is easy to understand. But it assumes that the Winnipeg families are engaging in outrageously unCanadian behaviour. And this reflects the sad fact that our debates around multiculturalism are marked by a widespread lack of understanding of current Canadian reality.

How many of us, for example, are aware that in April 2008, Ontario Education Minister Kathleen Wynne assured a conservative Christian lobby group that “Should a component of any course conflict with a religious belief held by a parent or a student aged eighteen or older, the right to withdraw from that component of the course shall be granted on the written request of the parent or student”?

I had never heard of this letter, until a student drew it to my attention. Nor, it seems, has the *Globe and Mail*, which has never referred to it. But one will find it on various conservative Christian websites, such as one that counsels parents on how to fight “homosexuality” in public schools (one needs a sharp eye to spot this insidious threat, the website warns: “homosexuality can even affect mathematics through word problems”).

So it turns out that in their “foolishness” (Ibbitson’s word), those Winnipeg immigrants are simply demanding something that has already been promised to every Ontario parent. The question of whether “they” should embrace “our” ways must be replaced by very different questions: should any government make the sort of promise that was made in Ontario? Is there some body of learning to which every child should be exposed, whether or not their parents desire it? Or should parents have complete control over what their children do and do not learn?

Because we have failed to debate tough questions such as these, governments have taken the easy way out, as governments are wont to do. Parents upset by the prospect of their kids becoming more tolerant tend to be more vocal than the rest of us, who are happy to hear that schools are doing what they can to decrease the level of hatred in our society. And education officials are more likely to be pressured by “creationists” than by voters who value scientific literacy. So concessions are quietly granted, leaving us without a leg to stand on when the same privileges are demanded by some “new Canadians.”

This case resembles many that have led to heated discussions of multiculturalism. Few of us noticed that religious groups in Ontario were authorized to conduct family law arbitration. But an Islamic group’s attempt to do the same sparked widespread fears that multiculturalism had “gone too far.” The countless neighbourhoods that are almost exclusively ‘white’ attract little attention, but many Canadians are disturbed by the residential concentration of ethnic minorities.

Repeatedly, an issue concerning all of us is misunderstood as an immigrant problem. Repeatedly, the debates we need are preempted by over-heated multiculturalism debates. Paradoxically, our multiculturalism debates repeatedly prevent us from addressing the issues that make us want to debate multiculturalism in the first place. We suffer from a national itch that is not improved by compulsive scratching.

In the present case, we need a debate about parental rights and the role of public schools in sustaining a national community. Rather than an endless discussion about whether immigrants must adapt to “Canadian ways,” we need to become more aware of what those Canadian ways truly *are*, and we all need to talk about just what we want them to be.