Is multiculturalism a part of Canada’s national identity? Has the public’s attitude towards Canadian multiculturalism changed over time? Consider how immigration and multiculturalism laws have evolved and how debates on immigration and multiculturalism have prompted change.

From Tolerance to Understanding-The Canadian Journey

By Sihao (Frank) Liu

Canada is a nation most known for our strength in hockey and our love of multiculturalism. It is without a doubt that multiculturalism has and will likely always remain an integral part of Canada’s national identity. In a recent survey, Canadians ranked multiculturalism as the second most important part of our identity, placed only after the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. After our years of success however, we have begun to grow idle. Every year, our Canadian Multiculturalism Day goes by without even a Google Doodle. By casually accepting our progress and thinking that there is nothing left to be done, we are limiting further progress. While we have already achieved a great deal, true cultural understanding is a necessary and logical next step.

In 1988, Brian Mulroney declared the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. This act sought to not only recognize equal rights for all cultural groups, but also strongly encourage cultural understanding and unity. Canada’s policies after this act have become the world’s standard for welcoming new immigrants and encouraging cultural diversity. While we have already managed to distinguish ourselves from the American “melting pot” of cultures, we still have to distinguish between the achieved cultural tolerance and our final goal of true cultural understanding. Even this tolerance has become worrying with the new laws passed in Quebec, since if we strive only to tolerate and not also understand, our cultural mosaic will inevitably start to tear.
Nonetheless, Canada does still have some great initiatives such as Inter-Action. This plan promotes multicultural events in communities, but a more coordinated approach for implementing programs like these is needed. The small size and scale of these programs makes most Canadians completely unaware that such things even exist, or that only cultural tolerance is not enough. While everyone is proud to call themselves Canadian, it is difficult to truly grasp what that means until we understand the various cultures that make up our country.

The cause of our limited knowledge of other cultures is in part due to the lens with which we view them with. Despite rich and long histories, most cultures are only viewed in terms of their festivals and their food. Our knowledge of other cultures has become far too reliant on their holidays, and we tolerate people from other cultures without actually knowing anything about them. The danger lies in that a society based on tolerance is far more fragile than one based on true understanding. With the Attawapiskat housing crisis illustrating cracks in our paragon of multiculturalism, we will not be able to continue to be the world’s standard if we do not recognize room for improvement.

The key behind multiculturalism, diversity and understanding is education. Despite our educational system being ranked amongst the world’s best, the ideals of multiculturalism have all but failed to make a mark in this realm. With classmates of mine from Dubai to the Netherlands, it only seems natural to believe that Canada would have an educational system that would at least attempt to reconcile these distinctive cultures with our own. The sad reality is that this is far from the truth. My grade 12 history course for example, is formally known as World History since the 16th Century. On the first day of class, we were informed that it could be more accurately described as the West
and the World. It’s not only “world” history, as the disparity is even more visible in English class. My studies have mainly been limited to only British and American works, leaving students with no exposure to other great works from across the globe. From African to Asian, to even Canadian works themselves, having students read writings of a variety of cultures including our own will undoubtedly increase appreciation and understanding.

Canada has done a great job in fostering understanding between cultural differences, but more needs to be done in actually fostering understanding of cultures themselves. Though full cultural understanding is a far slower process, it will undoubtedly strengthen our national identity. If we understand another culture, then there will not only be toleration, but also acceptance and integration.