



Press Release

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Multiculturalism is about Inclusiveness, Social justice and Empowerment, Says Former Director of Canada's Multiculturalism Program

While multiculturalism has been official government policy in Canada since 1971, it has never been universally accepted and opposition to it continues to the present. Moreover, the multiculturalism program's increasing focus since the 1980s on battling racism has come at the expense of the policy's original intention of promoting inclusiveness for individuals from all communities in Canada. These were two of the major conclusions reached by Orest Kruhlak, who delivered the 37th Annual Shevchenko Lecture in Edmonton on March 14th at the University of Alberta.

In his talk, Mr. Kruhlak treated the policies of multiculturalism and official bilingualism in Canada as complementary and reinforcing one another. The Official Languages Act was passed in 1969 and the policy of multiculturalism was adopted by the government of the late Pierre Elliot Trudeau in 1971. Opposition to both, he said, came from people who "did not want their conception of what Canada was and their place in that Canada changed." According to Kruhlak, the two policies aimed to change the conception of who legitimately was Canadian as well as the nature of power relationships in Canada. The primary purpose of multiculturalism, he concluded, was "to make ethnicity irrelevant as a marker in Canadian society... that ethnicity should no longer be used to rank Canadians and that all Canadians should be of equal worth." In Anglophone Canada, the policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism threatened the elite and the average Canadian whose value system and culture were largely British. By conveying official status on French through the Official Languages Act, the status of French Canadians was raised, as prior to this they had been regarded as second-class citizens by many Anglophone Canadians. In regard to multiculturalism, if Anglophone Canada would accept the reality that it was indeed multicultural, this in effect meant recognition of diversity. Kruhlak further noted that if English-speaking Canada would acknowledge that it was not a monolithic but diverse society, it would be more inclined to accept Quebec's legitimate demands.

Bilingualism and multiculturalism were also attacked by the nationalist-inclined Francophone elite. Even the Official Languages Act was bothersome to Quebec nationalists as legally it conferred status to language and not to a group. They also understood that in supporting multiculturalism Trudeau was promoting the idea that Canada was a nation of many peoples, and that French Canadians, although a critically important component of Canada, were nevertheless but one of many groups. Trudeau's multicultural policy denied that Canada had an official culture, which Quebec nationalists equated as denying Quebec the status of a distinct society. In promoting multiculturalism, the Trudeau government was also challenging the idea of the Two Nations concept of Canada, which implicitly conveyed special status to one or the other of the two so-called "founding nation" groups.

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In his talk, Kruhlak stressed the contributions of two Ukrainian Canadians--the late Laurence Decore and Manoly Lupul--to the development of multiculturalism in Canada. Dr. Lupul, the first director of the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, was able to push politicians in directions they did not wish to go, and played a major role in establishing the Non-Official Languages Program. Although the program no longer exists, Dr. Lupul, Kruhlak noted, was able to achieve a critical breakthrough in defining what Canada was all about.

Laurence Decore and the late Walter Tarnopolsky were responsible in large part for the inclusion of Section 27 on multiculturalism in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which states that "This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians."

According to Kruhlak, Decore understood well what the multiculturalism policy was supposed to be about. Although ethnic singing and dancing were important as manifestations of diversity, Laurence Decore believed that multiculturalism was really supposed to be "about a society which in fact practices social justice and inclusiveness rather than simply professing it. Most importantly, Laurence understood [that] the politics of multiculturalism was about power.... His foremost goal was to change the nature of power relationships in Canada so that individuals from all groups could legitimately participate in the political life of this country."

In the early 1980s the first race relations elements were added to the government's multicultural program. While this initiative, Kruhlak said, "expanded the social justice dimension of the policy", it "[came] to overshadow all other elements of the Program" and, in so doing, "set aside other equally important matters." As a result, concluded the speaker, some groups, like the Ukrainian Canadians, found themselves excluded from the program--a great irony for a policy that had its intellectual origins in the striving for inclusiveness. He noted that a major multiculturalism conference in April offered some hope that the policy would "return to its roots." He also urged ethno-cultural communities, like Ukrainian Canadians, who have devoted less of their energies to multiculturalism issues in Canada recently, to become more involved again.

Orest Kruhlak is well-placed to speak with authority and first-hand knowledge on the subject of multiculturalism. From the early 1970s until his retirement in 2002, he held high-level positions in the federal government in the areas of heritage, culture and multiculturalism, serving as director of the Multiculturalism Program. He thus had an insider's view of the origins and evolution of multiculturalism from its foundation as government policy until his retirement in 2002. His most recent position was Regional Director, Western Region, Department of Canadian Heritage.

The annual Shevchenko Lecture is co-sponsored by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and the Ukrainian Professional and Business Club of Edmonton.

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