



Canadian Needs Enlightened Tolerance

By Dr. Lorne Foster

On a popular episode of the 1970s TV sitcom, *All in the Family*, the shows' loveable bigot and patriarch Archie Bunker confessed: "I like company, I just don't like it when they visit."

In a wider context, this might be called a media metaphor that encapsulates the kind of diversification that has occurred, and continues to occur, in our society.

While Canada has historically sanctioned the diversification of society through immigration, it has not always been equally intent on fostering the kind of welcoming environment that could cultivate diversity and reap its potential dividends. Today there is a rational consensus in Canada that diversity is integral to society-building and global competitiveness. But this rationale is mitigated by the dominant cultural practice of slotting the new diversity mix into the old pre-existing categories. The result is, Canada, like Archie Bunker, does not have a problem with diversity, but it has a problem when diverse multicultural minorities actually want to make an appreciable difference, and have a stake in society.

In a sociological sense we might say, while there is a high degree of "habitual tolerance" in Canada (that is, a superficial tolerance of differences that do not seem threatening), there is a low degree of "enlightened tolerance" (meaning a deeper understanding and appreciation of diversity as something to be enjoyed for its own sake and as a way of learning about ourselves and the world at large). And it is in this discrepancy between habitual and enlightened tolerance that Canada becomes the loveable bigot - manifest in hierarchical and colour-coded relations of power and privilege.

For instance, while people of colour represent a rising proportion of the Canadian population - from just 9.2 per cent of the labour force in 1991, they will comprise 18.4 per cent by 2016 - their status in positions of leadership in Canadian society does not match their growing share of the population and labour force. On the whole, incomes for visible minorities trail those of the average Canadian by 15 per cent, according to Statistics Canada. And the Conference Board estimates that the annual costs of unrecognized learning for people of colour range between \$2.2 billion and \$3.4-billion.

Since the importance of people of colour to the Canadian economy will only grow in the future - as visible minorities become the major source of new workers - a welcoming environment will help Canada attract the talented individuals needed to power the economy and enrich the social fabric. But this, of course, is not likely to occur if Canada cannot get beyond the Archie Bunker-like definition of diversity as habitual tolerance. Instead, continued under-representation will reduce Canada's overall economic potential and risk its social cohesion. Consider that the Aboriginal violence in Ontario and British Columbia and protracted police-minority youth tensions are just two of the contemporary indicators of a system already in trouble. To paraphrase sociologist Augie Fleras - The option is clear for the dominant White

culture: Unless it moves decisively towards an enlightened tolerance, and moves over to make space for *all* Canadians, our much vaunted multicultural mosaic will be shattered into fragments too numerous to retile

On the other hand, people of colour are no longer solely dependant on the benevolence of the dominant culture, and without leverage in the bid for inclusion. Now that there are actually significant numbers of visible minorities in Canada, it is time to start instigating enlightened tolerance - by putting inclusiveness into institutional practice that is anchored in the acceptance and promotion of differences as necessary, normal and beneficial.

In an era of global markets and local needs, institutions increasingly rely on the language skills, cultural knowledge, life experience, and international connections that people of diversity bring to the workplace. So, there are good reasons for enlightened tolerance, especially at a time when both the workforce and the community at large are increasingly diverse and demanding. Multicultural minorities allow institutions to capitalize on an expanded pool of talent, foster more cooperative working relations, promote a positive corporate image, secure open lines of communication with diverse communities, and assist in priming domestic and international partnerships.

However, there is an even better reason for visible minorities to begin to instigate a new and enlightened “diversity centric” culture. For people of colour there is no other option.