



In Search of a Merit Based Society

By Dr. Lorne Foster

The term "merit" comes from the Latin *meritum*, meaning "worthy of praise" or "deserving of honour."

It was over fifty years ago that sociologists Kingsley Davis and Wilbert More defined a society with a pure class system as a meritocracy – a horizontal system of social stratification based on personal merit. Such societies, they argued, are worthy of praise and deserving of honour because they hold out rewards to develop the talents and encourage the efforts of everyone. In pursuit of meritocracy, a society promotes equality of opportunity while, at the same time, mandating inequality of rewards. In other words, a pure class system would be a meritocracy, since it rewards everyone based on ability and effort. In addition, such a society would have extensive social mobility, blurring social categories as individuals moved up or down in the social system depending on their performance.

Today the Davis-More definition of social meritocracy might be called ethno-racially brain-dead. That is, it is a perspective that is absent to what we now know about the reality and possibilities of pluralism, and a mixed multicultural and multi-racial world.

This matter was highlighted by Statistics Canada's most recent release of the demographic trends from the 2001 census confirming that visible minorities now make up 13.4 per cent of Canada's population. In total, 58 per cent of the immigrants arriving since the prior census in 1996 came from Asia, 20 per cent from Europe, 11 per cent from the Caribbean, Central and South America, 8 per cent from Africa and 3 per cent from the United States. Chinese people are now Canada's largest visible minority group, with a population of more than one million. They now make up 3.5 per cent of Canada's population, followed by those of South Asian origin (3 per cent) and Black (2.2 per cent). Up to twenty years ago, minorities made up less than 5 per cent of the population. However, demographic projections indicate that fully 25 per cent of Canada's population could soon be foreign-born.

Race Replacing Gender

The dynamic multiplicity of the contemporary social fabric has prompted sociologists like Jeffrey Reitz of the University of Toronto to forecast in the Canadian Press that – "Race relations are going to become a more central issue in Canadian society in the future. I think that's really a foregone conclusion," he said. "Where in the last 30 years or so gender has been a big topic, I think that's going to eventually be replaced by race relations. That just seems inevitable ... The trend suggests Canadians will find out in the coming years just how racially unified their country is."

In the 21st century, with the interplay and impact of rapid change and growing diversity, the ethno-racial implications of Canadian society contradict the sociological definition of the merit of a purely "vertical" class-based social structure. Indeed, as multicultural minorities vie for power and scarce resources, it is not far-fetched to describe

Canada as the contested site of a struggle between opposing forces and competing agendas, that is ultimately only manageable and amenable to a "*horizontal*" framework for multicultural inclusiveness – as a new baseline for political dialogue against which the possibilities of a meritorious society are evaluated.

To put it another way, until merit is viewed as a horizontal principle and not a vertical one – that is, until institutions and workplaces are broadened in their scope to embrace proportional representation of the multicultural mosaic – the search for a political unity, social coherence, economic prosperity, and cultural enrichment will remain elusive.

Judging Ability

Today, a typical workplace merit system is still described as a system where employees receive appointment and promotion on the basis of ability rather than by political pressure or patronage. However, since workplace standards and measures of ability are a matter that is not self-evident or unproblematic or neutral – but rather, a matter that has to be interpreted and convened – ability too, is already a concept subject to culture context, and often used as an instrument of power politics.

Canada's multicultural and multiracial pluralism entails a social reality in the new millennium that has to come to terms with and be complemented by a new model of achievement. The challenge of ethno-racial pluralism is not only to see merit-in-diversity, but also, to embrace diversity-as-merit.

In our new horizontal reality, life can only be worthy of praise and deserving of honour when institutions and workplaces look like society.