

Sen. Paul Yuzyk imagined multiculturalism as Canada's contribution to the world



Senator Paul Yuzyk's children Vera Yuzyk, from right, Evangeline Duravetz, Ted Yuzyk, and Vicki Karpiak look at photos of their father in Ottawa on Tuesday, April 25, 2017. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Sean Kilpatrick

OTTAWA — Paul Yuzyk had earned high marks in teaching college and believed he would soon be standing in front of a chalkboard.

Seventy-seven times, he applied for teaching jobs. Seventy-seven times, he was rejected.

It turns out some people did not want a foreigner teaching their children, which came as a surprise to the young man, who was born and raised in Saskatchewan by parents who had immigrated from Ukraine at the turn of the century.

"To him, it was a real sign that he wasn't accepted, even though he was Canadian-born," said his daughter, Vera Yuzyk, "and that Canada needs changing."

Canada's identity has been shaped by its people, from its original Indigenous inhabitants, to its earliest settlers, to the immigrants who have arrived from all over the planet — now representing more than 250 ethnic origins, from Afghan to Zulu — to build a new life in Canada.

They brought elements of their cultures with them, through their food, their dress, their prayers and language, contributing to the identity of Canada as it evolved into the diverse society it is today.

"Canada has learned how to be strong not in spite of our differences, but because of them," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a November 25, 2015, speech in London.

At the time, a series of deadly terrorist attacks had rocked Paris, migrants and refugees were flooding into Europe, and a celebrity businessman by the name of Donald Trump had launched his bid for the White House promising to build a wall on the border with Mexico. And here was the newly elected Canadian prime minister, on one of his earliest trips overseas, arguing that encouraging newcomers to retain their cultural identities is one of the best parts of who we are as a country.

It is a story that, by virtue of our history and geography, is uniquely Canadian.

It is a story that allows the four children of Yuzyk and his wife, Mary, to celebrate their Ukrainian heritage and yet be proudly, unquestionably Canadian.

It was not always written that way.

In 1963, newly elected Liberal prime minister Lester Pearson had launched the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism as a response to growing tensions between English-speaking Canada and Quebec, where nationalism was on the rise. Paul Yuzyk had been named a Progressive Conservative senator for Manitoba that year. In his maiden speech in the red chamber early in 1964, he balked at this notion of cultural dualism.

Indigenous people were on the land long before the French and the British arrived, he said, and it was immigrants from elsewhere in Europe, including Ukrainians, who answered the call to settle the western provinces.

Those who did not descend from either of the so-called founding nations — the people Yuzyk referred to as the "third element" in Canadian society — saw their share of the population more than double since the turn of the century, he told his colleagues.

Multiculturalism — or "unity in continuing diversity," as he also called it — should be celebrated as part of what makes Canadians who they are, he argued, but also Canada what it is.

"This principle, in keeping with the democratic way, encourages citizens of all ethnic origins to make their best contributions to the development of a general Canadian culture as essential ingredients in the nation-building process," he said.

In response to intense lobbying by Yuzyk, Ukrainian community and other groups, the commission dedicated the fourth volume of its report to the contributions of ethnic groups and recommended ways to foster and protect their cultural and linguistic development.

On October 8, 1971, Liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau responded by unveiling his government's new multiculturalism policy.

"Although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other," Trudeau said in the House of Commons.

"It was just such a vindication and an acceptance of the reality in Canada," said Vera Yuzyk.

The focus on multiculturalism was happening as Canada was also opening its borders to a greater diversity of immigrants. In 1967, it became the first country in the world to introduce a points-based system that linked permanent residency to the ability to contribute to Canada.

The doors would open wider still a few years later, allowing for more immigration based on family reunification and refugees, boosting the number of newcomers from non-European countries.

In the early days of the push for multiculturalism, though, the so-called "third element" in Canada was largely white and Christian. These more established groups, by then well integrated into mainstream Canadian society and not seeking much in the way of accommodation, were the ones leading the way.

Andrew Griffith, a former director general of multiculturalism and citizenship for the federal government, said the fact that multiculturalism evolved gradually over time to adapt to changing immigration patterns is one reason why the idea has been more successful in Canada than in other countries.

"It doesn't mean it's working perfectly, but I think it definitely helped," he said.

The policy also came with government funding for cultural groups. It never amounted to more than \$30 million a year, but it fuelled accusations the policy was more political than pure.

David Collenette, who was minister of state for multiculturalism in the final year of the Trudeau government, said that while it is true politicians want to appeal to as many different people as possible, politics was not the driving force.

"If Sen. Yuzyk was here he would say this had nothing to do with getting Conservative votes in Western Canada," he said. "This was all about just doing the right thing and making those people not of English and French origin comfortable."

As Canada entered the 1980s, the multiculturalism program began to take more seriously its goal of removing barriers to full participation in society.

Jim Fleming, whom Trudeau named as minister of state for multiculturalism following the 1980 election, said this emerged out of a growing awareness that immigrant communities, especially visible minorities, were experiencing discrimination and racism, which could not be solved with money for things like food festivals and traditional dancing.

Fleming said the decision to include multiculturalism in the Charter of Rights of Freedoms helped the concept grow beyond tolerating diversity.

"It was about ensuring diversity," he said.

That work continued with Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act, passed in 1988, gave the Trudeau-era policy some government-wide legislative teeth. It tasked all federal institutions with being sensitive and responsive to cultural diversity, and made overcoming discrimination and racism an official goal of the policy.

Gerry Weiner, who held the portfolio at the time, said they knew integrating the increasingly diverse population required institutional change.

"If the institutions in society do not reflect them — if they don't see their face in the window — they don't feel like they really belong."

By the early 1990s, criticism of multiculturalism had expanded beyond Quebec, where it had from the beginning been viewed as a potential threat to its French-speaking identity, and Indigenous Peoples, who were, and remain, resistant to any suggestion they are just another tile in the mosaic.

One of its fiercest critics was Neil Bissoondath, a Canadian novelist born in Trinidad, who in his 1994 book, "Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada," argued it was building silos, not bridges.

"They were, as I liked to call it, weapons of mass inclusion," said Liberal MP Hedy Fry, who was minister of state for multiculturalism from 1996 to 2002.

The Conservative government of Stephen Harper stressed that multiculturalism must include integration — especially in a post-9/11 global context.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel had gone so far as to say, in 2010, that multiculturalism had "failed utterly." But as Griffith pointed out, the Canadian version of multiculturalism — often studied, but never fully replicated — had always strived for integration, including by stressing the need to learn either English or French, rather than maintaining enclaves of ethnic and religious minorities.

"Such an approach fails to address the most basic questions people have about each other: do those men doing the Dragon Dance really all belong to secret criminal societies?" he wrote. "Such questions do not seem to be the concern of multiculturalism in Canada."

The Liberal government of former prime minister Jean Chretien reviewed the program in the mid-1990s, ending the direct funding of ethnocultural organizations and bringing in language about fostering "attachment to Canada."

Fry said there was also greater emphasis on the idea that Canadians comfortable in other cultures and languages could help strengthen international trade.

Still, Conservative cabinet minister Jason Kenney, who remained in charge of multiculturalism throughout the Harper era, argued in 2008 that moving the program to the immigration department meant it would benefit from being linked to settlement programs that aimed, in part, to develop a common understanding of what it means to be a Canadian citizen, and shifted the emphasis from rights to responsibilities.

Kenney also took on an important political role, earning the nickname of "the minister for curry in a hurry" as he worked to woo ethnic voters away from the Liberals, underscoring the important place new Canadians have come to occupy in the life of the country.

The Trudeau Liberals have made "diversity and inclusion" a major theme of the Canada 150 celebrations, but more than 50 years ago, as the country was preparing to celebrate its centennial, a former schoolteacher was already describing a similar vision for the country's future.

"It will be Canada's contribution to the world," he said.

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June 27, 2017