

Immigrants and Language Learning¹

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Christy

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Re Fear and Language

I enjoy reading your articles and often agree, but this time.... Your article bespeaks limited experience and limited historical understanding of the area into which you have waded.

I am a European immigrant who had to learn English during my teens. I arrived with my parents and siblings. We all tried hard to learn English as quickly as we could. Even though my parents were middle aged and of low education and skill, they also insisted on learning English as soon as possible. They retained very pronounced accents and even bad grammar, but they made their way. They went through their citizenship process with pride and independence—on their own, without being cuddled by agencies.

For people not to put a premium on learning the local language is ridiculous. They will never become citizens with pride for their adopted country or its culture. When I meet such people, I shake my head in amazement and wonder what kind of restrictions they voluntarily impose on themselves. Or how they contribute to this nation and the local community. How useful are they to Canada? Why should they be accepted?

It is derailed and distorted aspects of multi-culturalism (MC) that have convinced people that common language has little or no value. And having governments around that actually discourage common language is very sad and destructive towards the development of a national spirit and some semblance of common values.

I have spent 30 years in Nigeria, a country with 400 indigenous languages, but its government was wise enough to retain the one language they all had in common, the colonial English language. So, though they are proud of their indigenous multi-cultural situation, they do insist that, starting from grade one, everyone learns English. They need this for the sake of their unity.

To insist on everyone learning English or French has nothing to do with fear. That notion of yours is absolute nonsense. It has everything to do with nationhood, community and values. At this point English and French are still dominant in their respective areas. We can afford to argue the way you do, for the non-English and non-French speaking groups are still in the minority. But if you allow the current trend towards other languages at the expense of English or French to continue and you arrive at a situation where you have

¹Letter of response to one Christy who wrote, "Fear and Language," in *The Province*, 28 Oct/2007.

more and larger groups that share no language, you will see the wisdom of the country with 400 languages.

Most of the immigrants you are speaking of come from the Third World. I have lived in that Third World for 30 years and have loved it. The basic difference between West and Third is not development, but worldview, state of mind.; development or lack of it is a by-product of the reigning local worldview. It is the difference between a combination of two Western traditions: the religious tradition of Christianity and the philosophical tradition of Enlightenment with its subsequent rationalism, individualism, positivism, closed spirituality, absolute autonomy, etc. etc over against a host of so-called Third World perspectives that have many things in common with each other—communalism, personalism, open spirituality, giving more space to emotion, another type of logic, authoritarianism, oppression, tribalism, suspicion of government, disregard for law, other ideas of possessions and ownership, etc. etc. Some of these are positive; some, negative. They will never learn what we call “Canadian values” and we will never learn their positives if we don’t share language.

For example, a strong Canadian value is racial equality, but we have more racism in Canada today than before we ever heard of MC. We have imported millions of tribalists and racists. Try being a Black chef in Vancouver among mostly Asian colleagues and discover it for yourself. That racism will never disappear if the language barriers continue to be encouraged.

Another example is an imported gross mistrust of government that will not disappear with such language barriers.

When Europe imported labour, they also imported those traditions. They were so naïve and ignorant of other cultures that they expected those new comers would simply adopt European ways. The ignorance of those decision makers is nothing short of criminal. When Canada imports Asian people or Asian money, those perspectives come along. So far, we haven’t had the troubles experienced by Europe.

MC is full of inherent tensions and weaknesses. If our Third-World immigrants have mistrust of government, what cure does MC have for that? If they come with tribalistic minds, how can MC help them shed it? I am not sure that MC has any answers for these issues, but refusing to learn the reigning local language is definitely not part of that. What trumps what on basis of MC?