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BLACKS IN CANADA: PROBLEMS OF ADAPTATION IN A NORTH

AMERICAN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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Canada

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Blacks in Canada: Problems of Adaptation in a North American Multi-cultural Society.

by Dr. Wilson Head

A considerable amount of attention has been given by historians, sociologists, and other scholars to the problems of Blacks living in North American Society. However, most of this attention has been directed toward blacks living in the United States. In fact, there is some evidence that many scholars are not even aware of the fact that a black population exists in Canada, or when Canada is thought of, it is often considered as a junior partner to the United States or even as a fifty first state. This type of thinking easily leads to the conclusion that there is no significant difference between the condition of blacks in Canada and those living in the United States.

Of course there are some similarities. Blacks were originally brought to both countries as slaves. Both countries inherited a basically British tradition, although the presence of some several million French speaking Canadians has, over the years, provided a major difference in the predominantly anglo-saxon cultural pattern of the two countries.

The major differences in the condition of blacks in the two countries are two fold: First is the fact that the small black population of Canada is rapidly increasing. This fact results in a rapidly growing black population in Canada, and particularly in the two largest cities, Toronto and Montreal.

Second, the composition of the black population is changing. The older settled Canadian black population, supplemented by a small scale immigration of African and American blacks, has been surpassed by the

new immigrants. As expected, this development has had a number of repercussions. One of these is a certain degree of antagonisms developing between the two groups; the older Canadian born blacks often reflect some resentment of the newcomers who in general tend to be better educated, more militant and who often downgrade the contributions made by the Canadians.

In spite of the rapid increase of West Indians of African ancestry migrating to Canada, the estimated black population is still quite small. Slavery never took hold in Canada as it did in the American south. This is probably not because Canadians have a higher degree of ethics or moral principles, but simply because slavery was not profitable. For whatever reasons the records indicate that few blacks were brought as slaves to Canada during the 16th and early 17th centuries. The early influx of blacks to Canada consisted largely of American slaves who escaped from the United States between 1820 and 1860 through the so-called "Underground Railroad". Several thousand escaped slaves, mostly farmers and tradesmen lived in southwestern Ontario and in other areas of Canada during the period immediately preceding the civil war in the United States.

In general, most Canadians welcomed these escaped slaves, and went to some lengths to make them feel at home in the new country. Many of the ex slaves attained considerable wealth and standing in their local communities. However, the picture is not entirely positive; a number of racial incidents occurred in Canadian communities during the 1840's and 50's which suggested that Canadians were not as non racist as initially suggested. Some black students were not permitted to attend the public schools; segregated schools were established in some communities. Actually the last segregated schools were not abolished in the Provinces of Ontario and Nova Scotia until 1965,

just eleven years ago!

These problems, plus the harsh Canadian winter, and perhaps a wish to return to the land of their birth and to friends and relatives led to thousands of ex-slaves returning to the United States following the abolition of slavery at the close of the American Civil War. This move resulted in a rapid decrease in the black population of Canada. Probably less than 50,000 individuals remained at that time.

The black population grew very slowly during the period between 1865 and 1940. In addition to the natural increase, a small number of West Indians migrated in the country during the period. The more recent rapid increase in black immigrants, mentioned above, has occurred largely since changes in the Canadian Immigration Act of 1967 which removed racial barriers and instituted a "system" of selection based on the number of points assigned. This system provided several criteria for immigrants; each item was given a certain number of points, usually ten. An individual must score at least 50 points in order to be admitted as a landed immigrant.

In theory, the point system is non discriminatory...anyone can migrate to Canada as long as he or she can achieve the required number of points. There are however, other problems. For example, few Canadian Immigration offices are found in African, Asian, or West Indian countries. But the net result of the new act was that thousands of newcomers did enter the country and became landed immigrants. An estimated 60,000 to

70,000 West Indians alone have entered Canada as immigrants since 1967.

It is impossible to state the precise number of blacks who live in Canada. The Canadian census does not indicate the racial heritage of newcomers; only "place of birth" is recorded. This situation creates many problems for the social scientists attempting to obtain an accurate picture of the black population. Even the term "West Indies" is limited in this respect. Several of the Islands contain large numbers of East Indians and other groups who also migrate to Canada and are included under the designation of "West Indian". Thus an East Indian may also be a West Indian!

Other immigrants, again mostly West Indians, come to Canada via England or the United States. Many of the children of these immigrants are counted as British or American. Blacks in Canada thus form a very diverse group. This diversity, coupled with the relatively small population scattered over a huge land mass, creates many serious difficulties for the black individual as he attempts to cope with the problems of adapting to a strange and often harsh environment. Canadian winters are, in many parts of the country, extremely cold, and severely test the endurance of anyone. For the individuals coming from a warm climate, this climate must be almost unbearable. But harsh or not, the drive for economic security and advancement attracts thousands of immigrants from developing countries. In addition, possibly several thousand others enter the country illegally

and go underground. Blacks are included in this group.

The recent rapid expansion of the small black population in Canada has resulted in the emergence of a number of major problems in the black community. First, are the stresses and strains faced within the black population itself. Many older Canadian born blacks feel some degree of hostility toward the newcomers who in general tend to be younger, better educated, and more aggressive than Canadian born blacks.

Canadian immigration policy may be described as one of "creaming" the youngest, best educated, and more ambitious individuals from the West Indies...a fact which often leads critics of current immigration policy to the conclusion that many of the poorer countries are in fact, giving "foreign aid" to developed countries.

Some Canadian born blacks have complained that the West Indians come to the country with a "chip on their shoulders", and stir up trouble when there is no need. On the other hand, many West Indians feel that most Canadian born blacks are little more than "Uncle Toms", passively accepting the same kind of discrimination found in many parts of the United States. These feelings and attitudes have led to the development of a gulf of considerable scope between the two groups.

Second, the West Indian population itself is sharply divided. Hostilities and antagonisms exist between individuals from the various Islands. For example, many West Indians

from other islands do not like Jmacians, accusing them of looking down on individuals from the "smaller islands".

American or African blacks, although a very small minority of the black population, may be dismissed as "outsiders" by both major groups. While these problems are not exclusive to blacks (other population groups also divide along language, political, religious, and economic lines), this problem is more serious for blacks simply because they face more severe problems of adaptation to the largely white anglo saxon society of Canada.

Multi Culturism

A third major problem facing blacks is the emerging multi-cultural focus of Canadian society. The Canadian government has embarked upon the development of a multi-cultural and multi-racial society in which everyone is encouraged to maintain as many aspects of their old cultures as possible. The central theme of this policy is "unity in diversity" rather than the so called "melting pot" theory of the United States. Multi-culturalism is probably not the result of enlightened governmental interests; rather it reflects the fact that large numbers of new immigrants are actively engaged in promoting and maintaining their old ways of life in the new country.

This immigrant population consists of approximately 7,000,000 individuals, or approximately one third of the population of the country. This is a formidable bloc whose

votes are counted by all political parties.

While the concept of multi-culturalism makes good sense within the Canadian context, it does create several problems for the black, who is generally recognized as merely one additional ethnic group. It is difficult to engender any great concern for the plight of Canadian blacks when other ethnic groups: Italians, Greeks, Portugese, Spanish speaking South Americans etc. also encounter a certain degree of discrimination. The major difference is of course, in the high visibility of the black, and the impossibility of changing this situation. The second or third generation Italian or Greek tends to enter fairly easily into the main stream of Canadian society. This is not the case for the black...research indicates that his difficulties, while far less than in the United States, do not disappear when he attains University degrees or enters the business or professional world. He is still black and often encounters discriminatory treatment based upon nothing other than the colour of his skin.

Secondly, the black, as merely one more ethnic group, suffers keenly from his relatively insignificant minority status. He is a minority among minorities. And the black individual often finds that other minorities, struggling to make a place for themselves, will turn upon him and attempt to outdo native born Canadians in subjecting him to discriminatory treatment. There are indications that some of the most bigoted Canadians are new Canadians.

New Developments

A more recent development in Canadian society is the increasing number of overt attacks upon blacks and other visible minority individuals and groups. In the past, Canadian society has been characterized as "hypocritical" in terms of its treatment of blacks and other racial minorities. It was very rare for a Canadian to openly express prejudice or discriminatory attitudes. The job, according to the employer, has "just been filled". Or the apartment had "just been rented". No Canadian would state that he would not employ or rent a house to blacks.

Newspaper accounts, new items on television and radio, and informal accounts, however, suggested that the former more or less subtle type of discrimination in Canada is no longer the norm. Newspaper headlines of the shooting of a black in a shopping plaza, fights between blacks and whites youth in schools, and the increasing number of complaints filed with the Ontario Human Rights Commission, the official provincial government agency for dealing with discrimination based upon race, creed, sex or national origin, are increasing. Many blacks complain of harrassment by police officers.

However, until recently, there was no reliable knowledge of the scope and extent of these problems. For example, while it is known that complaints are increasing steadily each year, not only from blacks, but from Asians as well. The extent of these complaints as a proportion of the total number of

individuals who have suffered some form of racial discrimination, is unknown. Neither is there any reliable information available relating to the results of complaints...to what extent are complainants satisfied with the results of their complaints. Or again, what percent of blacks who experience discrimination actually report the incident to the Commission or any other appropriate body?

These and other questions resulted in the development of a proposal for a study of the perceptions of blacks regarding discrimination in Metro Toronto. The proposal, made by the writer, was accepted and funded by both Provincial and Federal levels of government.

The study, entitled "The Black Presence in the Canadian Mosaic" consisted of interviews with a selected random sample of 349 respondents in one main, and three sub-samples. These included adult blacks, black youth, a non-black sample, including Whites, Asians, Phillipinoes, and others, and 32 interviews with black professionals and leaders of black community organizations. The study was published in September, 1975 by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, an official agency of the Ontario Provincial Government. Although many of the findings may be considered applicable to Canada as a whole, the actual data was collected in the City of Metropolitan Toronto.

The findings include data which support both negative and positive perceptions of prejudice and discrimination against blacks in Toronto, and by extention, in Canadian society. It is important to note that all respondents, black and non black, agreed that discrimination against blacks does, in fact, exist in Canadian society and in Metropolitan Toronto.

Respondents also agreed that discrimination exists most extensively in the areas of housing and employment. Smaller numbers of respondents indicated that discrimination in community service organizations, and in commercial activities, including banking, mortgage and trust companies, shops and restaurants etc., also exists, but less extensively than in housing and employment.

Second, approximately 60.0 percent of all black respondents reported that they had personally experienced one or more instances of discriminatory treatment during the last three years. While reported by few respondents, discrimination by government agencies, the police, immigration officers, etc., was seen as particularly abnoxious, and engendered strong feelings of outrage. This attitude was most strongly felt by West Indian immigrants; Canadian respondents tended to be less angry. However, this phenomena was only a matter of degree; both groups expressed bitter feelings concerning the extent of discriminatory treatment in a city which has prided itself on its lack of bigotry and prejudice, and its assumed superiority over American cities in this respect.

Positive Experiences

The assumption that Canada is less racist than the United States was strongly supported by this study in spite of the prevalence of discrimination mentioned above.

Although approximately 60.0 percent of respondents reported having been the objects of discriminatory treatment, most, (78.1 percent) reported that they like living in Canada and in Toronto. Most immigrants respondents, (mostly West Indian) reported that they came to Canada because they expected

to find a better environment, better opportunities for themselves, and better education for their children. Others came because of the presence of relatives and friends who had previously migrated to the country. In most instances, these expectations were met in the new country.

In general, the neighborhoods in which blacks live are viewed as "warm and friendly" places, even though occasional racial incidents do occur. Most blacks in Toronto live in racially mixed neighborhood; even where there are concentrations of blacks, the number does not exceed fifteen or twenty per cent of the total neighborhood population. As a result of the dispersal of blacks and relatively harmonious inter-racial living, few blacks 16.7 percent, reported fears of ghetto type developments occurring in Toronto. Some respondents actually favor the development of all black ghettos because this would, in their view, lead to "an increase in black solidarity", "strengthen the self-image of blacks", or would "increase the economic power of blacks".

Unlike the situation in virtually all American cities, a considerable number of Toronto blacks have moved from the centre of the City. Approximately a third of the black sample live in the various suburban areas, and many are actively engaged in religious, political, civic, social, recreational, and other forms of community activity. The relative lack of social barriers, as pointed out by Hill in 1960, is "perhaps unique among Negroes on this continent".

Negative Experiences

In spite of the positive aspects of Toronto for blacks, however, living in the city can be an unsettling and disturbing experience. Until recently, the hidden and subtle nature of much Canadian prejudice made it very difficult

for blacks to mount a sustained struggle against this form of racism. In fact, blacks were not always aware of the nature of discriminatory behaviour directed against their aspirations. For example, few black respondents reported difficulties in purchasing a home in Toronto. It was reported that homes were shown to blacks by realtors in every section of the City. Other respondents, some of whom were realtors themselves, reported that many mortgage companies refuse to lend mortgage money to blacks. Race is never admitted as a factor; the buyer is left thinking that his credit rating, his limited income, or some other economic circumstance is the real reason for his failure to obtain the loan.

While much of the prejudice and discrimination against blacks in the past has been subtle, and often difficult to combat, it nevertheless has served as a formidable barrier to full participation of some blacks in the economic, political and cultural life of the wider community. This is true in spite of the high levels of achievements by some blacks during the early part of the century.

The recent rapid decrease in the black population has changed the racial picture in a dramatic fashion. Increasing numbers of blacks are demanding full participation, and this factor is resulting in increasing awareness of barriers to achievement. In addition, blacks and Asians have been increasingly subjected to physical attacks as their numbers have increased.

Frustrations and antagonisms may be considered normal results of discriminatory behaviour. The individual may react by militant action against the oppressor, or conversely, he may resort to attitudes of apathy,

and despair, in many instances, he may react by projecting his hostilities upon his own group. Both apathy and militant action is recorded by our respondents in the study referred to above. For example, less than ten percent of the respondents who have experienced discriminatory behaviour had reported this behaviour to the Ontario Human Rights Commission, the official government Human Rights Agency, or to any other appropriate group. Most respondents simply did nothing, believing that any action on their part would be useless and futile.

Emerging Patterns Of Resistance

On the other hand, there is evidence that increasing numbers of blacks, and other minority groups are developing new avenues of attack upon racism in the country. Older black organizations are becoming more militant. Increasing numbers of new organizations are being formed. The National Black Coalition of Canada is one example of this development on the national level. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association, Labour and Church groups, and ethnic organizations are beginning to join forces in order to mount effective attacks against the growing incidence of overt racism in Canadian society. An example of a local group which has been recently organized is the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, an interracial group composed of whites, blacks, and orientals and other visible minorities joined together as a mechanism for people who want to enter the struggle against racism in Canada. The organization is based on the assumption that in spite of increasing evidences of overt racism in the country, there is among Canadians a strong reservoir of energy and goodwill which can be activated and mobilized for effective action. There are indications that the majority

of Canadians are embarrassed and disturbed at the signs of increasingly overt racism, and are prepared to support action by both government and voluntary organizations to eliminate this evil from Canadian society.

Non Racial Education

One of the major areas in which immediate action must be taken is that of education, particularly education directed toward helping young blacks learn to understand and appreciate the contributions that blacks have made to the growth and development of Canada. Winks, a North American historian, pointed out that:

"most white Canadians would not have learned that there were Negroes in Canada at all had they relied upon their formal schooling".

It is necessary that the contributions of blacks and other minorities be adequately recorded and made available to black students and to the adult community as well. The implications of the lack of attention to the contributions of blacks may easily lead to a sense of inferiority and negative identity. Although the public school system of the City has repeatedly been shown to be deficient in providing appropriate educational materials reflecting the changing nature of the Canadian population, the situation is far worse in regard to black students. It must be recognized that the increasing numbers of blacks entering the school system is creating a totally new situation for teachers and administrators. There has been some constructive action designed to meet this need, but it is far too little. Some teachers, according to many respondents, still engage in racially inspired behaviour including "name calling", channeling black students into mainly vocational courses rather than academic courses, etc.

In addition, much of the educational materials used in the schools, textbooks, audio-visual aids, etc., reflect negative racial stereotyping.

The study referred to above recommended among other-items that special educational programmes be directed toward teachers, that negative references to blacks be deleted from textbooks and other teaching materials, that all teachers be required to take one or more courses in human relations and that the Provincial Ministry of Education publicly declare a non-discriminatory policy toward the education of all children in the public educational system.

A considerable number of respondents in the Study reported a strong interest in learning about the history and culture of the various groups who constitute the black population of Canada. Fortunately, some limited efforts are being made in this direction. Black theatre groups, black dance groups, the development of a black library and book store emphasizing black history, culture, and aspirations are among the new ventures already established. It is important for blacks to develop viable institutions which will provide a meaningful sense of identity and individual and group achievement: It is also important for blacks to participate fully in the wider life of the total community.

Input Into Community Organizations

Few black respondents, however, favoured the development of the network of all black social and community agencies so frequently found in the large American cities. The majority of respondents want to participate in and be served by the same community agencies and organizations which serve the general public. Or they want a choice in the matter of the appropriate service. West Indian immigrants are more likely to ask that social and other community services be developed exclusively for blacks. This attitude

probably reflects the fact that for many newly arrived immigrants, exclusively black organizations and agencies may serve the purpose of easing the initial adjustment of the newcomer to life in a new and strange environment.

The data clearly indicated, however, that blacks want some degree of participation and control over community and organizations in order to insure that these institutions become more responsive to the needs of black citizens. A majority of respondents want a large increase in the number of black and Asian teachers in the public schools, more black social workers, in community service organizations, and far more participation of blacks on the boards of directors of the various police and voluntary community organizations and agencies. Only in this way will these agencies become knowledgeable and responsive to the needs of blacks.

Role Of Leadership

Winks noted that effective leadership among black Canadians was almost non-existent during the pre World War II period, largely because of a small widely scattered black population and the lack of consistent patterns of black-white relations in Canada. Racial barriers were continuously shifting and it was difficult to find issues which touched directly upon the lives of a great number of people. This pattern has continued until the present. Aside from the rise in overt attacks upon black and Asian people, there has been no consistent pattern of overt discrimination comparable to that which has existed in the various sections of the United States. In spite of the manifestations of prejudice and discrimination in subtle forms, it has until recently been difficult to find a rallying point for the emergence of strong black leadership in Canada.

In addition, Canadian blacks have been fully aware of the fact that for all of its limitations, the racial situation in Canada is far superior to that found in the United States. This situation has according to some, led to a certain degree of complacency and lack of militancy. However, Canadian blacks do read the newspapers, view television and visit friends and relatives in the United States. They are fully informed of the civil rights revolution which occurred in that country, and are becoming convinced that the time is ripe for a more direct attack upon racism in Canada. The influence of the increasing number of West Indians in the black population, is also being felt.

A third significant factor is the increasing emphasis by black and other groups in maintaining some elements of their former culture, including music, styles of clothing, food and life styles generally, following immigration to North America. This emphasis has led to a new appreciation of the heritage of Canadian blacks as well as blacks from the West Indies. It has begun to deepen the self awareness of majority groups, and at the same time, resulted in their becoming more determined to be accepted on their own terms...not merely because they have adopted white middle class values and goals. Fortunately, the Canadian government has recognized this phenomena, and actively promotes multi-culturalism through the provision of grants and other forms of support.

Another factor which is leading to a more activist mood among the black population is the threat of rising unemployment and the accompanying trend toward a reduction in the number of immigrants permitted to enter Canada. The black leadership has made it clear, however, that it will not accept a return to the former policy of favouring immigrants from the

United States and Northern Europe at the expense of those from the Third World countries. If there is to be a reduction in the number of immigrants admitted into the country, then this policy must be non discriminatory. Other visible minorities and a large section of the white population strongly support this position.

Finally, it appears that what is happening in Canada is , in many ways, a reflection of developments in other parts of the world. Increasingly individuals of African and Asian ancestry are leaving the so-called "third world" and seeking opportunities in the industrialized west, and particularly in North America. A generally more favourable economic and racial, if not physical climate, attracts many of these immigrants to Canada. While some blacks have privately indicated that they would like to see this flow reduced to some extent because of the difficulties of acceptance by the white society, few, will state this opinion publicly. Thus two apparently contradictory trends appear to be operating. First is the increasing degree of pride in the achievements of the black developing countries felt by most blacks in Canada. But this is accompanied by increasing numbers of blacks from those countries who migrate to Canada, thus leaving their places of birth for new opportunities abroad.

Summary

The Canadian situation for blacks is thus a mixed one. On the one hand the country is experiencing an increasing black population, largely through expanding immigration from abroad, mainly the West Indies. Many of these blacks have achieved a high level of integration and acceptance in Canadian life. Many report a high degree of satisfaction with the experience of

living in Canada and would not want to live in another country. For example, only seven percent of all blacks in the study reported preferring the United States to Canada; eighty-five percent preferred living in Canada.

On the other hand, as reported earlier in this paper, almost 60.0 per cent of respondents had experienced one or more instances of discrimination during the last three years. There is increasing evidence that the former pattern of subtle discrimination is changing into more overt forms of discrimination, including physical attacks upon blacks and other visible minorities. While this unprecedented situation could lead to increasing apathy and despair, the result has actually been different. Blacks are becoming increasingly militant.

One problem for the black leadership is the fact that the problems of blacks are to some extent diluted in the multi-racial, multi-cultural Canadian society. In a period of rising unemployment and economic prejudice and discrimination. An example of this is the frequent demand for "Canadian Experience" by some employers, this requirement usually has no applicability for performance on the job. However, even this experience can be turned into a source of strength. An increasing number of white individuals and groups are joining blacks and other visible minorities in a broad attack upon the many forms of discrimination, whether subtle or overt, in Canadian society. While it is unlikely that all forms of racism will be entirely eliminated in the absence of measures to improve the conditions of life for all people, the apparent new commitment to action by blacks and other groups may significantly reduce this evil in Canada, and hopefully in North American society as a whole.