

A SENSE OF BELONGING



CANADIAN DIVERSITY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES: A REPORT

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United Nations Association in Canada
Association canadienne pour les Nations Unies

A Message from the Executive Director

On behalf of our *A Sense of Belonging* Project team I am pleased to submit a Report that comprises an overview and analysis of Canadian national trends on multiculturalism and diversity as identified during a series of round-tables and community training sessions organized across this country over the last nine months. We take great pride in this initiative as a continuation of important research and outreach on related issues that we have successfully implemented over the past five years (*Integration and Belonging, Youth for Diversity and Youth Forums Against Racism*).

Canada is a country which has a relatively exemplary record of welcoming and embracing diversity in its many guises, but there are still important lessons to learn and apply with respect to combating prejudice, intolerance and indifference as we build towards a more cohesive society. The overall goal is to support and promote fulsome and equal participation by all citizens in Canadian society. These are lessons which apply in this country – and can ultimately be shared in other countries and communities.

This report is only possible through the frank and open communications we have had with community leaders and workshop participants. I extend warm thanks to everyone who has participated in all of the Regional Planning meetings; to the eighteen Regional Coordinators who are giving life to this project in nine communities across the country. To the members of our National Project Team under Vanya Berrouet. In particular, I would like to thank the writers of this Report Rebecca Cohn and Saad Khan and to a former Project Officer, Savannah Baskin, who has contributed significantly to this Report.

Last but not least, I want to acknowledge the generous support given to this project by the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Kathryn White

Executive Director
United Nations Association in Canada
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A Sense of Belonging: Introduction and Methods

A Sense of Belonging is a landmark initiative of the United Nations Association in Canada (UNA-Canada). It is an initiative crafted from and by local community stakeholders from across Canada. Since 2001, UNA-Canada has engaged nine regional communities in dialogue around multiculturalism in order to identify the gaps and challenges in addressing racism and discrimination at the local level. The initiative and its immediate predecessor *Integration & Belonging* was conceived as a response to some disturbing incidences of discrimination and community fear following the events of September 11, 2001. This was a forward-looking project to build social cohesion -- moving toward an understanding and acceptance of Canada's full diversity for all Canadians. The processes and exchanges that have occurred over these years have fostered a momentum that has become a hallmark of the *A Sense of Belonging* project, and has led to the implementation of locally defined community action plans in nine target communities.¹

A Sense of Belonging was officially launched in June 2006, with the establishment of its National steering committee. The United Nations Association in Canada project team identified two regional coordinators in each of its target communities to act as the nexus of the project between the national level, as well as serve to implement the community action plans in their respective regions – and to be the ‘knowledge transfer agents’ as we gather information from each of the regions. These individuals bring significant leadership and expertise to the project, and represent a diversity of experience.

¹ A Sense of Belonging target communities include Kamloops, BC, Calgary, AB, Yellowknife, NWT, Saskatoon, SK, Winnipeg, MB, Kingston, ON, Montreal, PQ, Moncton, NB, and St. John's, NL.



A Sense of Belonging, while focusing primarily on issues of racial discrimination, works within a framework that values a broad definition of diversity, and therefore, also aims to address other forms of discrimination through its community action plans. These include homophobia, ageism, and discrimination around gender, religion, able-bodiedness and linguistic difference. *A Sense of Belonging* has also applied a two-pronged strategy to targeting the gaps and challenges of multiculturalism in Canada. While discrimination often requires a reactive approach to the ways in which it impacts peoples' lives, *A Sense of Belonging* also works proactively to promote diversity and the positive aspects of difference. The *A Sense of Belonging* approach and plans for action were developed in collaboration with its local partners, including youth, community and emergent leaders, academics, service-providers, other community organizations and concerned citizens. Through a series of roundtables, workshops and facilitated events held between July and October 2006 in each of the project's target communities, UNA-Canada tapped into the collective knowledge and capacity within each community to guide the process where by priority areas for action were clearly defined, the necessary resources identified and mobilized, and collaborative work plans for the regional coordinators and their teams were established.



Small Group Session in Winnipeg
Regional Planning Meeting



Youth Workshop in Calgary
New Canadians, Film and Intersectionality



While the project's overall objective is to promote diversity and combat racism through local action, UNA-Canada is strategically positioned to develop a national assessment of the state of racism and discrimination in Canada given its breadth and depth of regionally based, local partners across Canada working on issues of diversity and discrimination. The purpose of this report is to highlight the common priorities and strategies identified across Canada through UNA-Canada's consultation process in 2006. While many of the key themes may seem as somewhat obvious in a discussion around racism and discrimination, the significance lies in the extent to which they impact distinct communities in similar and specific ways, and the implications this has for national policy around diversity, as well as collaborative community action.

While UNA-Canada, and in particular *A Sense of Belonging*, acknowledges the power and value of language, this report will simplify specific terminology for the purpose of concision. As indicated above, this project focuses primarily on issues of racism. However, the term minority will be used to describe visible minorities, as well as other marginalized groups in keeping with the project's broad definition of diversity. This report will also use the term *Aboriginal* to indicate all of Canada's indigenous, First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples. The term *mainstream* will be used here to describe the dominant or majority culture in Canada. (UNA-Canada is encouraging the use of the term 'new mainstream' which acknowledges that this is about Canadian culture and not race or religion, especially as Statistics Canada projects that our three main cities will be more than 50% 'visible minority' by 2010 – changing what we think of as visible minority). And finally, while UNA-Canada defines youth as 15 to 29, community participants in *A Sense of Belonging* placed a greater significance on the youngest definition of this demographic, and thus, *youth* will imply the 15 to 22 cohort in this report.



A significant recurring debate throughout the *A Sense of Belonging* initiative has focused on the way in which racial and other forms of discrimination interact with other social justice issues. Whether implicit or explicit, discrimination was either framed as a root cause of injustice or as only a symptom of a larger, systemic injustice. The approach one takes to this framing can have direct impacts on the course of action one chooses for addressing discrimination. While it is not the project's objective to evaluate the merit of using one approach over the other, it is important to recognize the difference when considering the key themes and actions identified in this report.

Institutional and Individual Readiness: Intent vs. Impact

Canada is a multicultural society, and studies indicate a consistent increase in its linguistic and religious diversity and in the number of new immigrants and visible minorities. From this initiative, this diversity, however, is often not reflected in a community's ability or willingness to recognize the extent to which it has evolved into a more demographically pluralistic environment. In many cases, this ignorance stems from the simple physical separation of ethnic communities from the majority and from each other. While the process of ethnic enclaving may



Regional Planning Meeting in Moncton



**Youth Workshop in St. John's
Hip Hop & Combating Racism and Discrimination:
What's the Connection?**



not be as obvious a feature of Canadian urbanity as it is in other countries (at least over generations), this process seems to be establishing itself in many cities. Regardless of the cause, the lack of cross-community interaction creates a number of obstacles in regards to social change relating to discrimination and racism.

Often, communities' inability to change with their population results from the slow adaptation process of institutions. Implementation or adaptation of government policy in communities has been raised as problematic. While racism and discrimination are generally acknowledged realities, legal recourse is often seen by minority communities as ineffectual or non-existent. When what the community perceives as hate crime is defined as "assault" or "vandalism" this denies the psychological effects they have on individuals and their communities, and sends a message to the broader public about the limited severity of these kinds of crimes.

Broadly, one can say that this is a perception that the pace of institutional change lags in comparison to the more rapid demographic changes of the communities they are designed to serve. Specific examples from each community include the lack of qualified staff within the education system to respond to the needs of minority students and to create an environment where diverse parents have the capacity to take an active role in their children's education. Target communities also indicated that local police were often seen as perpetrators of racist and discriminatory behaviour, but lacked the appropriate forums for the community to raise these issues.

The challenges with institutional readiness and response to diversity were also described personally. Day-to-day encounters with what were deemed to be racist or discriminatory acts were reported to result from the same lack of readiness on the part of individuals to understand



and accept difference in their communities. Discussions of individual racism were a significant feature in all the communities targeted through *A Sense of Belonging*. However, community members were largely united in their position that the discrimination encountered usually did not have a malicious or harmful intent, but was rather the result of a lack of understanding of the nuances of cultural differences. A salient example is the description one participant gave of the marginalization felt by Muslim students being “excluded” from attending campus events due to the presence and distribution of alcohol. The intention was not to marginalize these students. However, a lack of understanding around the religious restrictions of Muslim students limited organizers ability to develop inclusive events.

Similarly, youth leaders in the various communities indicated that the use of hateful and offensive language amongst youth receives what amounts to a tacit approval by role models who generally did not question the pejorative and often destructive implications this language can have. While youth may be unaware of the roots of the words or expressions they use, teachers and other community and youth leaders may have that knowledge but often turn a deaf ear to its use. This apathy and lack of intervention works to further perpetuate the use of language that is rooted in hateful and destructive historical realities. The most common example provided was with regards to expressions that target the queer community. The use of words like “gay” as meaning something intrinsically negative only serves to justify an already all too acceptable form of discrimination. Many communities suggested that the promotion of institutional “zero tolerance” policies would be a useful way of rooting out this culture of tacitly acceptable verbal discrimination.

The perpetuation of unintentional discrimination was reported to stem from an inadvertent “culture of avoidance.” Participants often explained that an emphasis on political-correctness



and the fear of offending serves to inhibit individuals from exploring differences in meaningful ways. This is true of both “mainstream” and minority groups; all sides equally reported a fear of “rocking the boat,” thus limiting opportunities to engage in substantive dialogue. At the same time, those who did want to speak out against discriminatory behaviour and practices often feared that they would not be supported and that there were few if any safeguards to protect them, or their position, after accusations were made.

The desire to limit offence by asking questions about difference often translates into a form of paralysis which impedes mutual dialogue. Participants in every community also reported a considerable lack of opportunities to dialogue around issues of racism, discrimination, and difference. In the few cases where these opportunities do exist, the absence of those individuals whose participation was required was and is generally absent. Therein lies a course of action to address the dichotomy between individual intent and impact: to foster an environment where individuals can ask questions without being afraid of being unintentionally offensive or sounding ignorant, where they can find answers and share experiences while also promoting the understanding that simply because someone is different does not mean they speak as a typical spokesperson for their entire group. As well, dialogue must also be directed towards the “unconverted”, in other words, to those most needing the message of tolerance, through creative means. At both an individual and communal level, this challenge must be undertaken with imagination as well as commitment.

From the perspective of community participants, the lag in response to changing demographics often stemmed limited action on the part of institutions and individuals to create forums for discussion around issues of racism and discrimination for fear that this would indicate their admittance that this was an issue they grapple with.



Community Collaboration

Having the ability, drive, and imagination to effect change at an individual or institutional level requires a certain level of sustained collaboration between organizations and cultural groups. This being said, almost universally, the lack of coordination between these groups has been implicated as one of the most salient and significant limitations towards creating this change. Groups within a specific community reported a general lack of awareness around the services, expertise and resources within both themselves and other communities. This has created duplication in services, a lack in leveraging other potential resource to further collective objectives, and maximizing on lessons learned and expertise and potential leveraging of limited resources and community capacity. At an individual level, there have been cases of individual burnout in the sector due to the pervasive sense of isolation and frustration at this lack of collaboration.

Part of this lack of effective communication between groups is territoriality. Organizations in the non-profit involved often resist meaningful collaboration because of the scarcity of resources available to do their work. Where collaboration has been reported, it has tended to exist only in a short-term and superficial manner, in other words, for mostly one-time events as opposed to a long-term, solidified collaboration towards social change. The result has been piecemeal approaches to the issue of discrimination, an issue that certainly requires a collective, integrated approach to tackle. A paradigm shift has been observed in the funding mechanisms that exist for this sector that has been a leading contributor to the separation of groups working on racism and discrimination-related programmes. Availability and access to funding now drives what efforts will be made to address issues of social justice, rather than funding mechanisms responding to the needs of the groups that can most benefit from it.



Given the scarcity of resources, and the competitive nature that this scarcity creates, it has been suggested that there can be a significant role given to larger funding bodies to use their resources to create opportunities for groups and organizations to develop common objectives and integrated strategies.

Schools and Learning

Communities reported the formal education system across Canadian communities suffers from same lack of readiness towards the growing Canadian demographic shift that plagues other institutions. This demographic change will be increasing dramatically: a report from Statistics Canada says that by 2017, Canada's visible minority population would be between 6,313,000 and 8,530,000, a 111% increase from 2001.² As such, the need for cultural competency in all sectors, particular in education is vital. Across the nine communities, there were concerns that teachers need to reflect the diversity of the students they teach, and develop appropriate ways to impart knowledge to newcomer students to help them adapt better to the norms of mainstream society. Educators also need to incorporate the positive messages – and challenges- of pluralism and diversity to their classrooms. While there is a plethora of resources that exist for teachers, they often require specific training that may not be readily available. It was reported that these resources are not necessarily linked to the curriculum educators is mandated to teach.

Teachers and school staff are not the individuals of concern: communities also reported the lack of education for parents of school-aged children. Many parents of minority children reported being reluctant to encourage or allow their children to participate in certain events out of fear of discrimination. There is also a lack of support for those same parents to help

²"Population projections of visible minority groups, Canada, provinces and regions 2001-2017". Statistics Canada, Demography Division, March 2005.



their children when faced with being the target of racism and discrimination. As well, parents of children that participate in racist behavior are not always aware their children are acting as such, and often lack the tools necessary to ensure this pattern of behaviour is stopped.

One particular concern that community members had was a fear that the reasons schools have been reluctant to take these issues of racism and discrimination seriously is due to a similar fear of acknowledging the problem. Educators often do not want to admit the issue exists, in much the same way individual political correctness inhibits proper dialogue. In order to foster appropriate dialogue around racism, many community participants felt that there was a need for educational institutions to move away from the stigma associated with being labeled racist and explore racism as the societal norm in Canadian society. Schools and school boards thus need to acknowledge and enhance their role in combating this normative racism by training staff and working with individuals who have the experience necessary in dealing with youth-oriented racial issues. Participants indicated this might include monitoring educators for bias and targeting younger age groups (0-8 years of age) to acknowledge and address racism at a more critical age and ensure a certain sustainability to this training. This would thus make it easier for educators to implement further diversity and anti-discrimination modules in their classrooms. Most importantly, participants widely reported a need for schools to develop an anti-racism and anti-discrimination policy which actively protects individuals who speak out against racism and allow for appropriate resources when racist acts are uncovered. (Clearly, this “monitoring” can also have the opposite effect, but this was not discussed.) Racist acts need to be properly acknowledged, and educators need to be aware of the possibility that the frequency of these acts (if directed towards a particular student) may be more than a singular event. Denying the frequency of seemingly isolated incidents through ineffective or inadequate



punishments can compound the damage these events cause individuals.

Media Portrayal

It seems almost redundant to mention media in the same breath as the words racism and discrimination in any discussion of the topic; however, it bears particular attention with relation to the *A Sense of Belonging* project. In every single community, participants were adamant that the media was seen as contributing to the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes. Of particular concern was the use of minority individuals as “tokens” for entire communities: advertising limited to displaying only majority community members and lifestyles: the dearth of minority reporters: and the general lack of positive coverage of events taking place within minority communities.

As well, no community gave the indication that the media could be, in any effective way, a tool to overcome discrimination. Media campaigns to promote positive messaging around diversity were reported to be extremely limited in their impact due to the fact they were very short-lived and therefore could not compete with mainstream media’s bombardment of contradictory messaging. An example is the use of terms like the “War on Terror” as a constant media shibboleth that overwhelms more positive views of the Canadian Muslim community. The scope of these positive media campaigns was also seen as a problem. While certainly well-intentioned, many of these campaigns lack a pan-city or pan-national scope. The need is therefore for a more ambitious media approach to combating racism, as well as a need for the media to see themselves in a more critical light.

Aboriginal Realities and Contributions

It was felt, by communities, that the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is so commonplace that mainstream Canada has been desensitized to the often unpleasant



realities that occur within it. The loss of culture within these communities and the intergenerational challenges this creates has had a devastating impact on Aboriginal youth. Aboriginal marginalization is not completely a unidirectional phenomenon. Communities have reported a perceived mutual exclusion between both Aboriginal groups and more mainstream groups. When planning events, for example, the labeling of a certain occasion as an “Aboriginal Event” is often assumed by non-Aboriginals as indicating they could not participate. (The reverse is certainly true with regards to Aboriginal participation in other community events.) Many participants also reported a lack of willingness on the part of organizations representing Aboriginal peoples to want to collaborate around issues of social justice, thus limiting the mainstream’s ability to reach out to and target Aboriginal groups in developing a collective action plan, especially when all participants’ objectives have a common goal. Community roundtables indicated that there is considerable disagreement as to whether the barriers and issues facing Aboriginal communities should be addressed independently of other groups experience social, economic and political exclusion. This debate is a long and complex one, and will certainly not be concluded immediately.

Employment

Aboriginal peoples, in common with many newcomer groups, do certainly have many obstacles in their path, none the least is the extensive systemic discrimination found in the workforce. The barriers towards getting employment were a key issue in every community. There were variations on the myriad issues relating to discrimination in the workforce. Some of them were more obvious, such as discrimination based on accent or name (for example, “Osama” and “Mohammed”). Other issues were more systemic and revolved around a perception of poor or absent policy. Examples of this include the need for training strategies to facilitate Aboriginal



peoples finding employment that take into consideration the barriers faced by those who have criminal records. Another is the lack of recognition for foreign degrees that relegates many foreign-born Canadians of impeccable qualifications shut out of the workforce. The issue of discrimination in the workforce is so pervasive that its effects often manifest themselves in a variety of ways that can not always be readily visible, but do exist and certainly further the marginalization of already marginal groups.

Immigrants and New Canadians

While racism and discrimination impact different communities in different ways, the realities of immigrants and new Canadians were brought up as unique experiences in each community. As mentioned above, in the employment sector, new Canadians experience multiple forms of discrimination (racism, voice discrimination, the lack of credential recognition, lack of local experience, etc.). Within the school system, immigrant participants reported not wanting to teach children their mother tongue out of a fear of developing an accent that could limit future opportunities. Also, new Canadian parents often require additional support to better understand the Canadian education system and to assist their children with their homework if English or French is not their first language, etc. Also, some older new Canadian youth who want to attend high school face financial barriers as some school boards charge attendance fees after a certain age.

Given Canada's diversity, participants were often dismayed that there was little to no recognition of the contributions immigrants make to their communities. This coupled with the lack of settlement supports, job opportunities, and individual and systemic resistance to change has made it difficult for these groups to find a sense of belonging in many Canadian communities. Some participants also indicated that while it behooved host communities to



work toward reducing barriers faced by newcomers, there was also a responsibility on the part of these individuals to take on some of the responsibility of adapting to their new environments. Newcomer exclusion is multi-faceted and complex, but the ultimate observation one can make from community discussions is that there is an underlying, subtle racial undercurrent that precludes new Canadians from fully participating in the national landscape.

Youth

In this report, the problems youth have with discrimination have been discussed with regards to education and institutional and community readiness. It appears every community recognizes that youth face significant challenges in coping with and addressing racism and discrimination. Participants indicated that youth do not feel safe to speak up and out about racism and discrimination in their daily lives. These fears range from lacking the outlets to report harmful occurrences and feeling that they will be taken seriously, to fears of being bullied and physically harmed. Participants indicated that most youth (particularly visible minority and new Canadians) were not aware of the services available to them. A particularly pernicious challenge facing youth was the loss or absence of cultural identity. A significant insight given in many communities into one of the causes of this loss was a general resistance and devaluing of diversity within this age group. A poignant example was given of an Aboriginal youth identifying as “brown” rather than something more specific to their heritage. The value given to diversity, therefore, is not quite trickling down to the next generation in a way that prevents their alienation. The desire, therefore, is for communities to create a climate where this self-imposed marginalization is undermined and replaced with a sense of pride and empowerment that does not limit itself to any particular age.



Conclusion and Recommendations

The common experiences of racism and discrimination perceived within communities across Canada indicates the need for a broad and integrated approach to these issues that supports collective action and response at both the local and national level. While Canada currently employs a number of different strategies designed to address racism and discrimination, these are often perceived or manifest to those affected as independent initiatives working in isolation from other federal activities. As racism and discrimination permeate many facets of life in Canada, a more integrated approach to addressing these issues is required at both national and community levels to ensure adequate impact.

Nationally, Canada's multicultural policy defines a country where "all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging," however, without directly informing other federal services, policies and provisions, the impact is often limited to raising public awareness without directly creating an environment where acceptance is genuinely experienced. A process of strategic harmonization of federal policy is required to ensure that the values espoused by Canada's commitment to anti-racism take root in the laws and services encountered by all Canadians, regardless of locale.

Governments and other funding bodies at both the national and regional/local levels also have a responsibility to ensure that resources are distributed in a way that adequately meets the needs identified by Canada's diverse population and the organizations that work to service them. Too often - and particularly as cuts to funding for social welfare initiatives increase - are sources of funding having a counterproductive impact on the ways in which the voluntary sector operates in this domain. Scarce and fragmented resources have contributed to a culture of competition within communities, where knowledge, capacity, and other supports are not



leveraged to address the systemic and community-wide realities of racism and discrimination. As a non-governmental agency, UNA-Canada also recognizes the innovation and situational partnerships that can be struck in response to limited funding or ‘requests for proposals.’ At the same time, for agencies with no core funding or little experience of independent fundraising the downside of using limited resources to be responsive to funding initiatives outweighs the potential and often unanticipated benefits. Funding bodies have a significant role to play in fostering a collaborative approach to these issues through encouraging collective response – encouraging these ‘tactical’ or short term partnerships to become strategic – much as we aim to integrate the issues of diversity in a cross-cutting way into all community development - and by allowing community groups to define the needs to which resources should be targeted.

Strategies to address racism and discrimination in Canada by promoting diversity are often missing a key ingredient required to make this messaging relevant for individuals who are not otherwise sensitive to these issues. Whether through local community initiatives or larger more national public awareness campaigns, these strategies have not been able to elucidate exactly *why* diversity should matter to the individual and her community. Many of the community members encountered through the *A Sense of Belonging* project did not view racism or discrimination as something that affected them directly.

As an ancillary to this, there is a dearth of local histories of migration and of the history of community and society building by the waves of immigration to Canada. Recognizing the provincial responsibility for education in Canada, there is a role for a national ‘convening’ organization like UNA-Canada to develop with local scholars, community leaders and historians – and Statistics Canada – local ‘histories’ of migration.



The breakdown of social cohesion is an abstract concept for most. Therefore proactive and positive diversity community engagement and outreach requires a specific and targeted approach that goes beyond ethics and values to provide concrete examples of how these issues impact people and their communities even if they are not victims themselves. This is particularly true for many smaller, more insular communities where Canada's full mosaic has not yet started to show itself. It is difficult to teach acceptance in an environment where difference is not a day-to-day reality. However, when the tangible outcomes of healthy social cohesion make sense on a personal level, the impact will follow the individual regardless of the environment she lands in. There is certainly something galvanizing about the projections for the Canadian urban population (Statistics Canada) – where a 'new mainstream' is already being created. At the same time, there are risks in addressing only the big centres. Rural Canada will change much more slowly and this dichotomy between urban and rural also risks further alienation where rural Canadians do not 'see' the diversity their country as urbanites may.

Whether racism and discrimination are seen as root causes or symptoms of larger societal injustices, its impact is real and requires a forward looking, holistic strategy in order to address its prolific nature in Canada. While other social justice issues are also rooted in systemic inequalities, a direct intervention in these cases can often alleviate the day-to-day hardships experienced. For example, while homelessness and hunger do not go away when a shelter or foodbank is established, these outlets provide relief and support to individuals, often incorporating efforts to assist them exit the cycle of poverty. There does not yet exist an appropriate relief or exit strategy for an individual who experiences racism and discrimination, whether directly, indirectly or at an institutional level. The findings described in this report suggest that this proactive initiative and approach of *A Sense of Belonging*, is, in fact a valuable one. UNA-Canada is not



a settlement nor legal nor language training organization. It is a 61 year old, national institution with powerful convening strength, a think and do organization which operations with an awareness of its capacity to provide in the language of Robert Putnam (Bowling Alone in America, 2001) bridging social capital. This initiative has not only allowed UNA –Canada to bring to the table a ‘new mainstream’ (those who may have thought of themselves as ‘mainstream’ while others may not) this initiative has also made us highly aware of our own role in projecting institutional diversity, a quiet but unspoken strength of the organization from our professional team to our seventeen branches and regional contracts across the country. A sense of belonging occurs through consciousness, conscientiousness and intent which need public engagement and outreach – and an active and continuing dialogue. The latter is surely a hallmark of what it is to be Canadian.



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