

Charles Taylor, "Globalization and the Future of Canada"

Is the nation-state really near the end of its useful life? Many have predicted that this venerable institution, which has proven so adaptable in the past, is growing hopelessly obsolete as we move into a new millennium of rapid globalization. But the democratic nation-state has survived fascism, Bolshevism, and legions of despots. Perhaps we should not count it out just yet. Here Charles Taylor reflects on the troubled Canadian federation, and argues that the nation-state has provided both the ideals and the practical tools to enable us to realize our potential as citizens of this country; now the time has come for us to broaden those ideals and collectively devise the tools that will see us realize our potential as citizens of the world.

Today, the word "globalization" has come to be thrown around a lot, and it is used much too narrowly. When people talk about the present stage or process of globalization, they generally mean the penetration of the market everywhere into different aspects of life within our societies. They mean a market that is much more international than in the past, one that penetrates states that until very recently maintained a strong autocratic position in the world - the communist and formerly communist states. Some states, like India, have a history of being relatively democratic and open, while still maintaining quite firm boundaries of control at their borders, but they are experiencing now the same sort of opening out.

Globalization also involves the development of world media spaces. The media now reach into all but the most remote societies. They thoroughly permeate these communities, and many media organizations are constantly casting about the globe, collecting their select audiences, those groups of people who are fixed on certain images and programs. Along with this, and not entirely separate from it, there is a world public sphere and the development even of

world civil society in terms of public opinion. Think of the tremendous importance in our world today of organizations like Amnesty International.

But perhaps the most fascinating aspect of globalization is the tremendous increase in international migration and the consequent diversification of the populations in many countries. A few decades ago a country like Canada had a population - speaking just of religion - that was Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. Today, every major religion is represented in substantial numbers within the Canadian population. And with this comes the development of another striking phenomenon, something we might call a diasporic consciousness. People now live in imagined spaces, spaces where they see themselves situated within a certain society, and more and more of these spaces straddle borders and other boundaries. You now have people who are in many ways fully integrated as citizens of their new countries, but at the same time retain active interest and contact with people in their country of origin. Their interest in the politics of one country feeds into their interest in the politics of the other, and they are linked also to their country-of-origin compatriots settled in different nations all over the world.

All these things have to be in your mind when we speak of globalization - even if it becomes a bit of a blur - because that is the context in which the modern nation-state has to operate.

We hear often these days that the nation-state, the central national government, is being bled of significance, made much less important. Some people believe we are reaching the point where we can do without this level of governance altogether. To me, this is complete nonsense because until we replace it with something else functionally equivalent - and that is not going to be easy - the democratic sovereign state we know, with UN membership and a web of international associations, is the only instrument of democratic control. It is through the state and

its elected representatives that people can hope to have some control over their destiny. And even the decisions that do have to be considered at a broader, international level can only come close to being democratic because they are made between governments that are so elected.

The state is something absolutely essential. In a period of rapid growth and intense global competition, the state has a tremendously important role to play because it is the only tool citizens have to help ensure that their society is well positioned in the international market. If we are talking about globalization in terms of the market, these state governments are the ones that are going to determine the level of education of our populations. Federal and provincial governments very often determine how research and development are conducted. They help to foster entrepreneurship, and in all sorts of ways work constructively with this entrepreneurship according to an immense variety of formulae which we see being tested in the world today. And it is unfortunate that people so often talk about these government-entrepreneur formulae as though there were only one proper formula for all time, or they think that if a formula works for a while and then fails to work later, then it must always have been the wrong approach.

On the contrary, perhaps all it shows is that in the future we have to think about revising our formulae more effectively as situations change. We have the necessity of maintaining states that are big enough to have some purchase in these matters while being small enough to be responsible. And that dilemma, that tension, that pull in two directions is what makes federalism so important for the future. I think this is a formula - or rather a family of formulae - that is going to have more and more play in the world. We are not witnessing the end of federalism; we're at the very beginning of it.

**Inside the State, Inside the Citizen**

The inner conditions of these democratic states are of great interest right now because the older forms the state used to maintain unity are coming under new pressures. In addition to the various aspects of globalization, there is also the inner diversification produced by migration and other phenomena, and we have this creation of transboundary spaces, the diasporic identities we touched on above. Those who are fascinated by postmodernism as a language say that we can have a new postmodern state to replace the rather intolerant unity of the old state; we can have instead an infinite multiplication of differences. In many ways this is a very attractive scenario. But I believe such a model is not feasible, because the democratic state needs a certain very strong kind of unity, but no longer the same one it traditionally has sought to foster.

I would say we need a certain unity of common understanding in a democratic state - something that was not necessary in the days of despotic, autocratic, hierarchical societies. Common understanding is a must because of the very nature of self-rule, the very nature of popular sovereignty as a legitimating principle. Popular sovereignty as a legitimating principle says that by virtue of ruling ourselves - through mechanisms of consent, election of assemblies, election of executives - we are free. We are freer than we would be under other kinds of government.

There is a requirement here that Rousseau saw with great clarity. His answers may not be to everyone's taste, and they aren't very often to mine, but I think he really did see certain fundamental requirements of this kind of rule very clearly. The question might be asked: Why I am free? My am I more free in this regime which has these procedures, even when I'm outvoted on something I consider important? Even if some potential dictator might agree with me on this very important issue, why am I nevertheless more free under this democratic regime?

Of course the last question does not very often arise on the level of the individual, but it can arise at the level of the group. A minority group may ask the question - Do we really belong here? Does this government really reflect us? Is this majority decision really ours, one that our people can be committed to? For the answer to these questions to be in the affirmative, there has to be a broad understanding that there is some kind of common purpose which is seen as fulfilled through public decisions, even when the decision goes against the individual's wishes. I share in the common goal even though this particular decision goes against me, by virtue of the way in which the decision is made.

There are two ways in which this kind of answer has been presented in order to be convincing to people. In the heady days of the American and French revolutions, this common purpose was spelled out in certain very universal moral principles: democratic self-rule, individual rights, and freedom from the despot. That was the original model, and it is very interesting to see how this model has mutated into a second one. The French revolutionaries were very taken with this archetype, and seemed quite unaware of the existence of an important boundary around something they called "the nation." They wanted to export their new principles to other parts of Europe, to the whole world. And indeed they set up new republics on the French model, and didn't think very much about the importance of the very real boundary of difference between themselves and their European neighbours. But for people in Italy and Germany, the boundary was tremendously important. And this is the beginning of modern nationalism, the great reaction in such countries against the French occupation, precisely because people did not feel that their freedom was embodied, represented, made real by these institutions. They felt rather that these institutions were imposed on them, were alien to them.

And so very rapidly it became evident that it would not be enough to try to rally people around this universal umbrella based on democratic principles, citizens' rights, and the rule of law. A second part had to be added: a notion that public institutions must also express and defend the society's particular cultural history and traditions. And today, the modern answer in democratic countries usually has some mix of these two facets - one in terms of universal principle, rule of law, and rights; another in terms of what you might call historical, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious identities.

So we have this great phenomenon of the modern world, the answer to the citizen's question - My does my participation in this regime represent my freedom? At their best, modern regimes try to do justice to this complex duality. Of course deviant forms have appeared on the scene since the early days of the nineteenth century, regimes that dropped altogether the universal moral principles. We think of the Nazis, and we think of recent history in the Balkans and elsewhere, where the equilibrium between these two aspects has been broken. But when societies put forth their most honest effort, they attempt a complementary balance of these two facets of the state.

### **The Jacobin Juggernaut**

The Jacobins in France saw the political identity of a citizen of the republic as the most important kind of identity; the other differences - religion, language, regional culture - were all secondary for them. Only 150 years ago, a majority of the people in France did not speak French; there were Basques and Bretons, and many other citizens who spoke mutually unintelligible Romance dialects. Those of a Jacobin bent sought to steamroll all these regional differences and

to make a true nation with one national language. But even if one possessed that kind of ruthlessness, this is no longer an option today, because the differences in our societies are multiplying at such a pace that they will be impossible to steamroll.

These differences are galloping along on more than one level and in more than one way. International migration is interwoven with the different mindset that today's migrants very often bring to their new countries. Taking the United States as an example, immigrants of old just assumed that they must learn English as quickly as possible. Often they simply deserted their mother tongue; parents refused to speak it to their children. But today many newcomers have no wish to assimilate within something that existed in the past, this revered idea of American citizenship; they want to be part of something that will come about in the future as a result of multiple acts of assimilation from many different sources. And in many respects this has been occurring in the United States throughout most of its history, despite the melting pot rhetoric.

And one sees something similar among Arabs in France. It is striking to consider the difference between the incredibly successful assimilation of inter-war immigrants from Italy, Poland, and other parts of Europe and the tremendous difficulties between the state and the more recent arrivals from North Africa. Now partly this has to do with economic conditions, but it is also connected to a change in the immigrants' mindset. In the past, they believed in the "liberation" that would come when one was absorbed by French culture. But this is not something that is likely to happen today when so many migrants share a diasporic consciousness.

And we must remember another kind of differentiation we see happening now, one that involves diversification within the population - phenomena that may always have been there, but in the past were recessive. Feminism is the most striking example of this. The idea that the agenda has to change to some degree, that the style of doing politics has to change, is something

that is now being put on the agenda. Here you have an internal differentiation in a population on issues that previously were just set aside so that society could maintain a very uncompromising unity and sense of itself.

Naturally, there is a great fear of all this difference, and in many ways this fear is not simply wild and irrational. The common understanding has been the cornerstone of our society for a long time. People rightly ask: What will we have in its place?

### **Canada: Nation-state for the Twenty-first Century?**

Our societies are being forced to examine different potential solutions to this problem at the end of the twentieth century. How can we forge the unity a democratic state needs in the face of these new and multilayered differences? Given the importance of this project to our future, and the unfamiliar territory it explores, it should not be surprising that there is so much uncertainty, fear, and passion as we try to find our way.

One attempt to deal with myriad differences is to try to reinforce the old general consensus within the society. Some would like to limit the citizenry's differences to the private lives of each citizen. Various American theorists have been developing these ideas of neutral liberalism, procedural liberalism. One's cultural life, religious life, one's ties to a country of origin - all these must remain part of the private sphere, to be left behind when the citizen steps outside the home to take part in the civil life of the nation.

Others embrace a sort of fundamentalist reaction, saying: let's go back to the original basis of this society, because after all this society is founded on certain vital principles. Americans sometimes show this reflex when they refer back to the framers of the constitution



and the principles that motivated them. And the modern French Jacobins find it absolutely unconscionable that Muslim girls should be allowed to wear head scarves in the schools of the Republic. For many people the separation of church and state is a foundation for the entire French civil tradition; they see a retreat on this issue as tremendously dangerous.

A third approach to the problem of the modern society, in all its diversity, is the idea that we must adopt a common identity, a sort of uniform of citizenship, like a hockey sweater, one we must all fit into in the same way. The appeal to uniformity here is underscored with an appeal to "equality"; special status is seen as a dangerous assault on equality as the founding principle of society.

But I do not believe we can follow any of these three paths at this stage in our development, because in our new society we have come so much to complement each other through our diversity, surrounded as we are by an increasingly complex international community. We do not all fit together as identical pieces of some great legion; our myriad differences make the whole of our society more resilient and durable, also richer and more dynamic.

In an earlier time, such approaches may well have worked, since governments were prepared to steamroll all sorts of differences within the population. Today we see that many Canadians who strongly support the Charter of Rights and Freedoms feel there is a great danger in special status for any group of citizens. Some interpretations of Canadian multiculturalism carefully contain this as a matter for the individual or voluntary group. And we have seen the attempt to build a bilingual Canada on the basis of individual rights that people can opt into or out of being served in the language of one's choice. But any attempt to restrict the common identity runs up against the same problem wherever there is a population for whom the survival

of a distinct culture or the development of a language, religion, or whatever is very important - so important that no political society that pushes these matters to secondary significance will be able to win the allegiance of these people.

Anyone who argues that our Canadian society's purpose has little to do with the survival of the French language will quickly lose six million listeners. Similarly, when we try to go back to the original ideals of our democratic forebears, we will find that our diverse present-day citizenry does not have the same attachment to the once- hallowed archetype. Recent arrivals to a democratic society want to be part of a process whose real history is in the future, not the past. The desire for "equality" is something that can sound very sensible and admirable when repeated over and over to a worried public; but in this context, equality equals uniformity. I think this runs against the reality of our world at the end of the twentieth century: we are living in multinational societies, and they will only become more multinational. No one can seriously argue that the Quebec polity's *raison d'etre* has nothing to do with the preservation of the French language. The defence of this language is a crucial part of our political existence. Of course it is very important to see that this is done in a way which is morally defensible and which does not undercut the other extremely important facets of our identity. By and large, I think this has been the case, despite a few deviations brought about by our extreme nationalists. But to suggest that this part of public policy is unnecessary, irrelevant - this is simply a non-starter for the people of Quebec.

Now if you take such a political entity, like Quebec, and make it a part of a larger polity where the cultural priority is not recognized, you are in for incredible strains. And we have seen Quebec's own Jacobins, who feel that the Quebecois could never share a real concern for the French language with people in Medicine Hat or Vancouver, and so we must have two separate countries. That is the road to disaster in the twenty-first century, not just for us but for the world

as a whole. And it is the road to disaster within Quebec itself, because the same problem then arises within that polity. We have to learn how to live with these multiplicities of identity and yet achieve some kind of common understanding. And this can only be by recognizing that our being together is important to us, that it enriches us, that it is something we all cherish; even if French is not one's mother tongue, we can still be committed to its survival and take pride in that.

And so we find ourselves with two basic guidelines that we need in order to ensure the survival and effectiveness of democratic nation- states in the twenty-first century. We must recognize that our identity space is not static, that the development of our common identity within the nation-state of the twenty-first century is in the process of being worked out. In some nations, this common identity will be negotiated and conceived for the first time. But even after that, it will have to be worked out again from time to time because our populations will continue to change. Second, we have to recognize we cannot all share the same historical identity; our growing nation-state is going to need to accept and work with a plurality of historical identities. We can no longer make our political boundaries coincide with the boundaries of these identities. But we can develop viable multinational societies in which the citizens' common identity includes a set of basic principles that recognize that we all want to work with each other to preserve these historical identities with their differences intact. And of course at this point we again run into the Canadian dilemma.

Many Canadians pin their hopes on the defeat of the sovereigntists in the next Quebec election, or at least in the next sovereignty referendum. But even if the federalists are victorious at the polls, the deep Canadian problem will still be there. And remember that this is only one of the deep Canadian problems - we also have the aboriginal dimension and the whole multicultural dimension.

And the root of this problem is that there is not yet a recognition of the multinational nature of Canada outside Quebec. There is a fear of recognizing Quebec as a people, as a nation, because this is seen as a step toward disunity. But this would not be a step toward disintegration; it would be a step toward ending all talk of separation. We are talking about a people who will always be a people; they cannot stop being a people and will never cease to see themselves as a people. It would make a tremendous difference to Quebec, and to the future of this whole country, if the rest of Canada could recognize them simply for what they are. Every time we find a constitutional word for it - "distinct society" or whatever - it is shot down. Perhaps one day we will come up with a word that we will all be able to pronounce without choking.

## **Conclusion**

If we, as a society, can find a way to resolve this dilemma, I think we will be doing the world a great service, because the problems Canada is wrestling with are the same ones that are troubling nation-states all over the globe.

In this country we have been so close to a solution for such a long time now; it is as if we are at the end of a very long journey but cannot bring ourselves to take that last step. And if we are not careful, we will indeed become a great example to the world, of a society that was unable to cross the threshold and become a nation-state for the new millennium.

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