

National Commissions on cultural and religious Diversity: When Reflective Processes Happen in Parallel within Several Nation-States

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This paper presents some of the results of a multidisciplinary analysis that includes recent national commissions which have addressed the challenges of managing cultural and religious diversity (Britain, Belgium, France, Quebec-Canada, etc.).¹ It is inspired

*by an upcoming publication entitled **Public Commissions on Cultural and Religious Diversity: Analysis, Reception and Challenges** (eds. S. Lefebvre & P. Brodeur, Routledge). It includes in-depth studies of the issues and controversies examined by each of the commissions, such as the ways they perceived the issues, the contexts in which they were established, their results and impact, the nomination and experience of their chairs and experts, the key political players involved, the media debates and reception surrounding each commission, and the*

communication strategies and difficulties their leaders encountered, as well as the applications and legal aspects each commission has raised.

The commissions, held between 1998 and 2015 in several countries, all reflect on the ideas of living together and coexistence, in order to improve the management of cultural and religious diversity. Each of them addresses major identity and demographic changes observed within their societies, such as the integration of certain religious minorities suffering from various types of discrimination, as well as the task of encouraging all citizens of a country to respect fundamental rights and equality.

The commissions under study have published meticulously written reports. Each one portrays a specific way to frame its national context in light of its particular challenges regarding national identity and diversity, in relation to law, public institutions and integration. As well, the reports address the management of various cultural, and especially religious, identities and behaviours. The commissions have also produced notes, specific reports, public consultations and briefs, with varying media reception. These reports and the substantial reflections that surround them represent a rich body of literature that helps us observe the evolution of many nations facing fundamental questions regarding their very nature, identity, history, and future. The convergence in the use of national commissions, as one way to stimulate public

¹ Two researches were conducted: *Secularization, laïcité and religious identities in the Quebec context*. Funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2008–2011. S. Lefebvre, principal investigator with Lori Beaman as co-investigator; *Cultural and religious diversity in four national contexts: comparative study of the identity dynamic and regulation of religion (Quebec, France, Belgium, Britain)*. Funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2012–2018. S. Lefebvre, principal investigator with Canadian co-investigators (L. G. Beaman, P. Beyer, J.-F. Gaudreault-Desbiens) and international collaborators (J. A. Beckford, C. Béraud, M.-C. Foblets, T. Modood and V. Uberoi).

reflection on such sensitive topics, represents a unique opportunity for comparative research. Here is a list of the commissions we included in the volume with Routledge.

Britain, Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, Chairperson Parekh

Launched January 1998; Report, July 2000:

France, Commission for Reflection on the Application of the Principle of Laïcité in the Republic of France, Chairperson Stasi

Launched July 2003; Report December 2003

France, Commission of Judicial Reflexion on Relations between Religions and Public Authorities, Chairperson Machelon

Launched October 2005; Report September 2006

Belgium, Commission for Intercultural Dialogue, Chairpersons Lallemand and Neyts

February 2004; Report May 2005

Belgium, Round Tables on Interculturalism, Chairpersons Foblets and Kulakowski

March 2008; Report November 2010

Quebec/Canada, Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, Chairpersons Bouchard and Taylor

February 2007; Report May 2008

Norway, Commission on Faith and Worldviews, Ministry of Culture

June 2010; Report January 2013

Australia, Research project and report entitled Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008-2011.

Morocco, National Commission for Dialogue on Civil Society and New Constitutional Prerogatives, 2012;

Report March 2015

Britain, Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, Chairperson Elizabeth Butler-Sloss

September 2013, Report December 2015

Among the commissions appointed by governments to develop proposals about issues of public interest, one must differentiate between permanent bodies and temporary, or 'special', commissions that are established to deal with a specific issue.² The commissions under study focus on this last type. Among the conclusions of the research, here are the main ones:

1) A Hazardous Exercise

The ad hoc temporary commissions studied in this book, which were established to clarify a collective issue, encountered many difficulties. We could even say that the problems were present from the beginning and stemmed from their very nature. There was even a *Mistreatment of Experts*. There is a complex power relation between politicians and the experts appointed to the commissions. In four cases, it is astonishing to find that the very day the report was published, or soon afterwards, politicians issued public denials or took an opposing position.

2) The Impossible Consensus

The assiduous process of public consultation and calling for contributions from numerous experts ensures the thoroughness of the process, but also disguises its relativity, as not all of the actors share the same opinion, even on basic issues. In most cases, the final reports prove inevitably to be a rather composite product of a relative consensus. In this respect, four patterns are observed. The first uses only the presidents as signatories (Bouchard and Taylor 2008 in Quebec), the second involves all commission members (Parekh 2000 in Britain and Stasi 2003 in France), the third

² 'If these groups are set up permanently they are councils, if they are just created to deal with a single question *ad hoc*, they are commissions'. Martin Schulz and Mark van Twist, 'The Governance of Policy Advice: Regulation of Advisory Commissions and Councils in Germany and The Netherlands', Paper for the 1st International Conference on Public Policy, 26-28 June 2013, Grenoble, France, 5, accessed 1 June 2016, www.icpublicpolicy.org/Comparing-policy-advisory-systems-45.

also includes all members, but discloses dissenting opinions (Belgium in 2005 and 2010), and the fourth indicates several possible solutions (Norway). In our opinion, the last two ways could be the most appropriate, as they avoid the need to pretend that there was a perfect consensus on an issue, and allow more than one viewpoint to be presented.

3) Specific Moments within a Larger Deliberative Process

The commissions are part of a larger process of reflection prior to and subsequent to the public exercise and the publication of the final report. In this regard, sometimes they do nothing but reinforce and confirm certain points. Implementation of the recommendations, should it occur, is at times discreet, both because of rivalry among public powers and commission members, and because the topic of diversity is very sensitive from an electoral standpoint. One journalist remarked that ‘a report is a very perishable commodity, which can be either praised or condemned depending on the flavour of the day or the current political interest’.³

4) What about Religion?

Until quite recently, the religious dimension has been subtle, if not invisible, in public reflections and research on diversity, multiculturalism and interculturalism in several Western countries. It has become increasingly noticeable, especially in the wake of the attacks on New York City in September 2001, hence the requests for clarifications from decision makers, several social and religious groups, and even from numerous citizens. However, the issue presents a very intriguing paradox for researchers: even though it is at the heart of the problem, it is often addressed in varying ways, more or less implicitly. The central issue addressed by each public commission’s report reveals the prevalent way of dealing with the problem of diversity in each society: racism and discrimination respectively in Britain and Belgium; application of the principle of *laïcité* in France; social cohesion and reasonable accommodation in Quebec. Nonetheless, most of the time, the core of these controversies is religion itself.

³ Michel David, ‘Les sincérités successives’, *Le Devoir*, 27 May 2014: A3 (a Quebec newspaper).

The oldest report, the Parekh report, was published before the September 11, 2001, attacks that later propelled Muslim fanaticism to the forefront, and the issue addressed was actually racism and discrimination against several visible minorities in Britain. While an entire chapter of the report is devoted to religion, it is only one of many aspects related to the racism problem. Moreover, the text appeals for the implementation of a specific commission on religion, which in fact took place later in 2013, as mentioned earlier. All of the other analysis reports are subsequent to this fateful day, especially in Western countries. As well, several countries producing such reports had also been subjected to terrorist attacks. The Stasi report openly addresses *laïcité* and religion in a Republican context.

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The Belgian reports are more reserved on this subject, incorporating the Islamic problem, whose centrality in the debate is yet obvious, into the issue of integration and discrimination. The Bouchard-Taylor report centers the issue around national

identity and the management of reasonable accommodation for religious reasons, even though its mandate did not mention religion at all, but rather spoke of ‘cultural accommodation’. Finally, there is a large number of categories and concepts related to the vast field of religion that appear throughout the various chapters of this book: convictions, beliefs, practices, signs and symbols, worldviews, faith, denominations, and so forth.

5) A Complex Process and a Simplistic Public Story

Texts written by experts clash with another social reality, namely what sociologists call ‘the social construction of a public problem’, wherein people simultaneously define a problem, attribute blame and develop solutions.⁴ This construct emerges as media and public evidence that becomes very difficult to call into question or to nuance. Not only does the controversy

⁴ See Céline Béraud, Claire de Galember and Corinne Rostaing, ‘Des hommes et des dieux en prison’, Research funded by DAP-Ministère de la Justice, no. 210.09.15.34, May 2013, p. 68–69.

attract the media, but almost all of a society's opinion leaders, who consequently go outside of their usual expertise to speak out on any issue that arises. A common characteristic of these discussions about diversity is that they cause a surge of interest regarding identity, which is compacted into a narrow focus on an issue with symbolic significance, such as the wearing of religious signs.

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