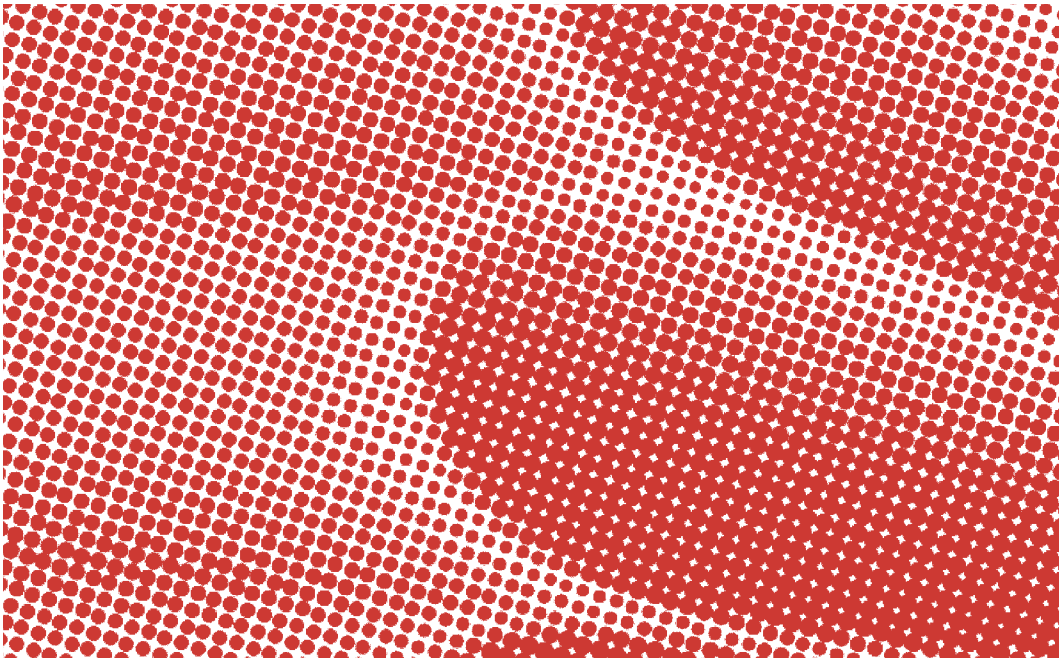


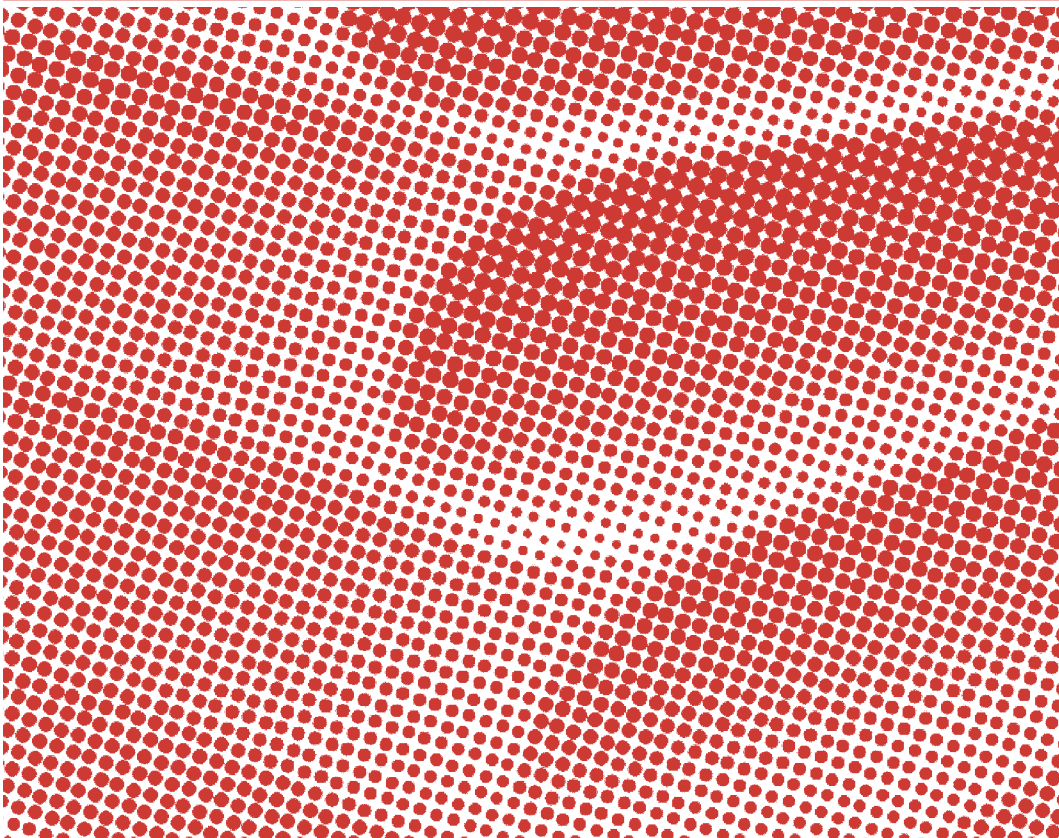
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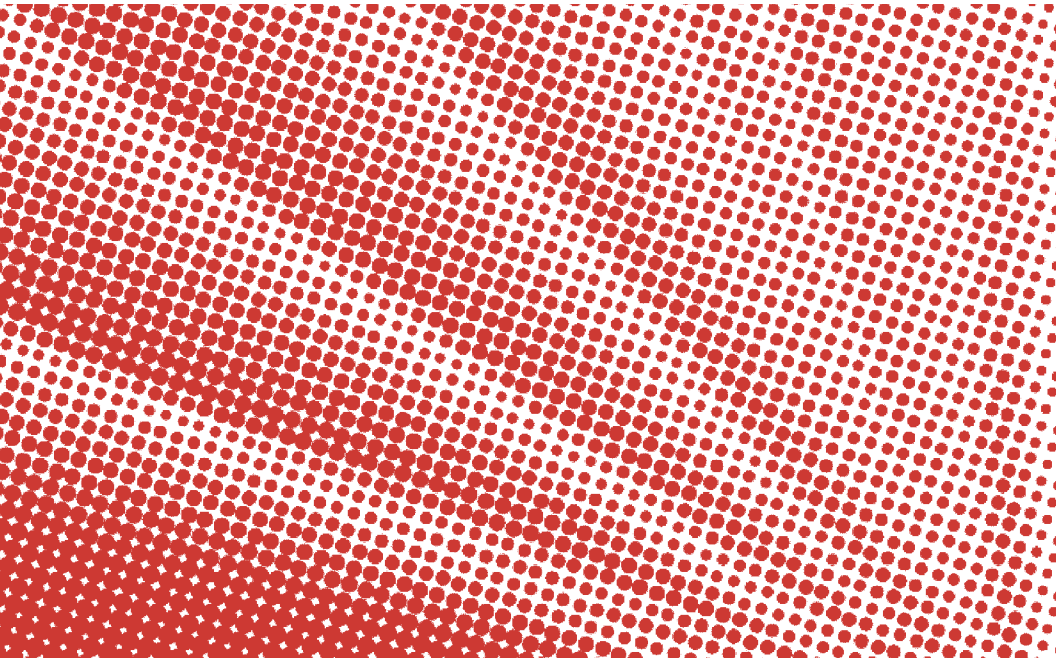
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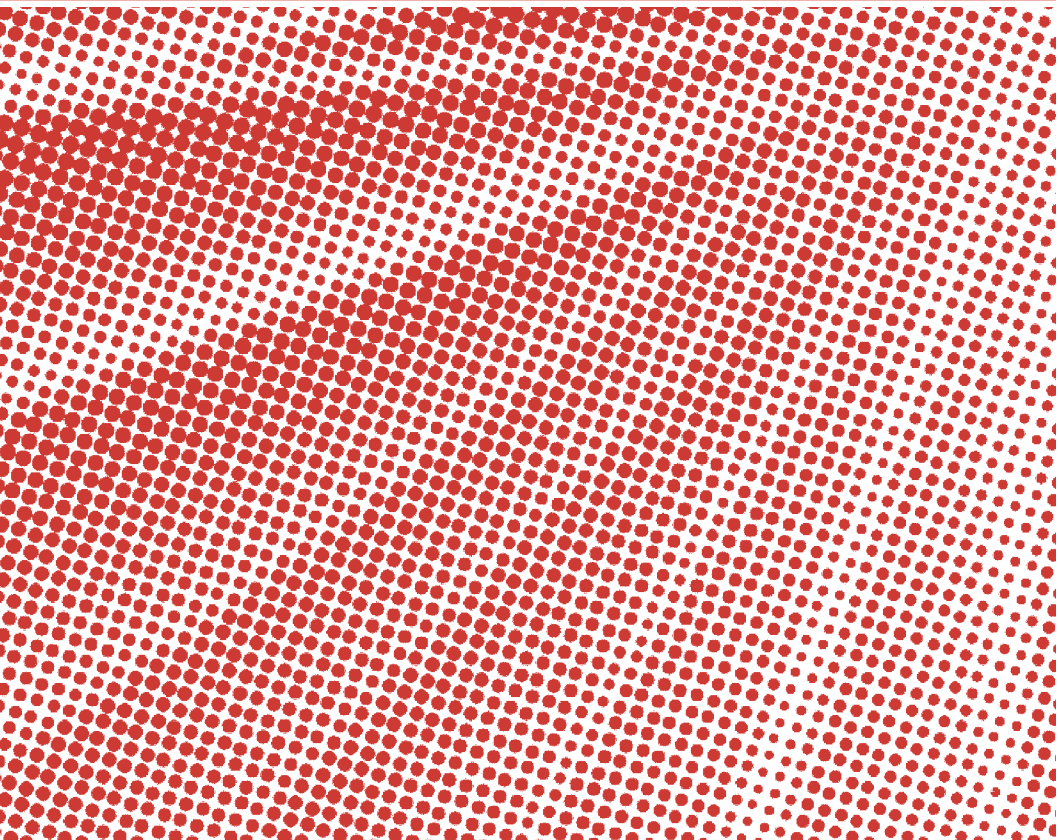


'For' and 'Against' Hérouxville: Democracy and
the Question of Media Responsibility





WINNING ESSAY BY **Audrea Lim**



‘For’ and ‘Against’ Hérouxville: Democracy and the Question of Media Responsibility

BY AUDREA LIM

IN LATE JANUARY, AS CANADIANS WONDERED ABOUT THE SEVERE COLD THAT HAD FOLLOWED AN UNUSUALLY WARM YEAR, THE RESIDENTS OF HÉROUXVILLE WERE DRAWING UP A CODE OF STANDARDS FOR IMMIGRANTS WHICH DECLARED, AMONG OTHER THINGS, THAT THE CIRCUMCISION, STONING AND BURNING ALIVE OF WOMEN ARE NOT ALLOWED, AND THAT IN THEIR TOWN, “THE ONLY TIME YOU MAY MASK OR COVER YOUR FACE IS DURING HALLOWEEN”¹.

Within days of its publication on the town webpage, the Canadian media had pounced on the story, and word even spread south of the border where it was picked up by Fox News. Canadians cross-country scrambled to declare their support for or outrage against the town of 1 300 – a town with a total of three non-white residents² – and the issue of immigrant assimilation and reasonable accommodation was thrust into the national spotlight once more.

Concerning the incident, the two national dailies ran a number of editorials and commentaries, ostensibly declaring their positions on the reasonable accommodation debate. On the one hand, the *National Post* stated that it was simply ‘disingenuous’ for the town to “behave as though they are under immediate threat of a ban on music in public places”³, just as it is disingenuous for Muslims to “agitate for the right to wear a veil in an identity document”. They also ran a commentary by Don Martin listing a number of “suggested attitudes and expectations for new arrivals”⁴, which – though politically-correct and much more socially acceptable – nonetheless retained the spirit of the Hérouxville standards: “Welcome! Leave your customs at the door!” – a headline summary of the standards, courtesy of the *National Post* themselves.

The Globe and Mail, on the other hand, vacillated between ridiculing Hérouxville’s city councillor André Drouin – “As for Mr. Drouin, he didn’t mind the *hijabs*. I think the women are kind of cute in them,” he said”⁵ – and deeming the standards racist⁶. The February 10 editorial states: “[The statement] is an insult and a provocation to Muslims. It is an attack on freedom of religion and conscience.”⁷

Canadian bloggers had a field day and citizens responded nationwide, some scoffing at the ignorance of the Hérouxville hicks, others rallying around traditional Canadian values and yet others bemoaning the impending clash of civilizations. The small town suddenly became a point of national interest and the new battleground for the reasonable accommodation debate. Though it may have been the work of media

sensationalism, behind the opposing cries of righteous indignation was a distinct fear that this was a vision of Canada's future, one perpetually mired in ethnic clashes and racial wars over rights.

We know Canada is not some post-apocalyptic racial war zone, however. Rather, it is a relatively peaceful place where people of different ethnicities interact amicably and genuinely with one another, even if racist incidents do occur and structural inequalities do exist. Hérouxville, for one, has never seen ethnic violence, having had at most a handful of interactions with visible minority immigrants. No surprise, then, when the media also asked: how did the Hérouxville residents suddenly become racial fanatics, and why has the incident created such national fervour?

The reason most widely cited was the fear of the ethnic other, generated worldwide through talk of jihad and the rising threat of China, among others, along with the fear of losing one's own way of life in an increasingly multicultural world. That is, second-hand reports presented over a period of time can be extremely compelling, even absent direct experience of ethnic conflicts. Most academic commentators claim that Hérouxville citizens acted in ignorance and out of fear for their way of life, in response to reports of religious accommodations made to minorities in Montreal. The incident would thus be better characterized as an eruption of fears and tensions already present in society rather than as a case of spontaneous racial combustion.

Furthermore, commentators have accused the local Quebec media of sensationalizing 'reasonable accommodation' incidents in the months leading up to Hérouxville, feeding off social fears and fanning their flames. Society thereby becomes polarized as well. "What could have been a constructive debate has been thrown on to a different track, where every interaction between francophones and others becomes a case study in 'reasonable accommodation' where one side – francophones – is always giving and losing," the *Montreal Gazette* described Jean-Claude Icart, a Université du Québec à Montréal sociologist, as saying⁸. A 'free' press, endowed with greater legitimacy in the eyes of readers as a result, thus abuses its position of power when it acts without restraint.

But blatant media sensationalism as journalistic *faux pas* is common knowledge. More significant is the fact that polarization can result from sober reporting as well. The partisan reporting of the Hérouxville incident by the two national dailies is thus of some concern, where

reporting followed usual party lines, the *Post* focusing on the ‘Canadian way of life’ as the ultimate social standard (essentially placing integrative responsibility on immigrants) and the *Globe* simply denouncing the standards as racist.

The failure of each paper to explain its viewpoints to readers that didn’t already agree – or to address the concerns of those on the other side of the divide – thus transformed what should have been a political debate into a political battle. Subsequent appeals to terrorism and ethnic violence by the *Post*’s Conservative readers and moral indignation on the part of the *Globe*’s Liberal readers thus came to overshadow and mask legitimate concerns: the importance of nationhood and racial inequalities, respectively. Of course, editorials are meant to convey a viewpoint, but adherence to old slogans simply negates any possibility of dialogue. The assumption that there are only two opposing poles of opinion replaces this possibility with that of mere compromise, for all other opinions outside of partisan lines are reduced to one pole or the other.

The result is that the core of the debate is left unaddressed, which is the debate on multiculturalism and what it really means. Perhaps due to the American cultural influence, the focus in the Canadian press has largely been on immigration policy rather than the policy of multiculturalism itself, upon whose clarification the debate on mass immigration depends. Regardless of whether or not immigration into Canada will boom in the coming years – it will⁹ – the problem of ethnic integration is already a pressing concern.

Thus, the social divide, perpetuated by media partisanship, prevents different interest and social groups from carrying out constructive debate and dialogue. This is particularly essential in the case of multiculturalism policy, which is concerned precisely with social groups of differing identities. Not only does debate concerning other issues run the risk of becoming stalemated, Canadian democracy, which is fundamentally tied with how we welcome and treat people of all ethnicities and social groups, becomes obscured. Democracy becomes a crippled version of what it is intended to be, for the freedom to speak is reduced to a clash of civilizations or, worse, a clash of dogmas.

Of course, democracy is already understood to entail certain individual and minority rights. But as new practical political situations and social problems arise – Hérouxville, for instance – we need to refine and sometimes redefine the tenets of our society. Democracy that is rigid

is not democracy, for it must address the needs of people in the present, which itself is always changing. What, in essence, does the ambiguous policy of multiculturalism entail in the practical social and political realm, and what does it entail for us today?

The multiculturalism debate is essentially a constitutional debate, and as long as it remains overshadowed by partisan politics, the appeals and opinions of those outside the partisan divide – minority groups included, perhaps – will remain unheard. Debate is not merely important but absolutely necessary in clarifying the fundamental questions concerning our state. Through partisan reporting, the media impedes the democratic process when it should be actively clarifying the issues at hand. Level-headed and constructive debate, involving a variety of different perspectives, can only begin once this occurs.

As the one thing that links together all Canadians on a daily basis, the media therefore has a responsibility in this endeavour. It is also for this reason that responsibility for presenting a wide range of viewpoints and providing grounds for discussion cannot be left to alternative or online media, which generally appeal to niche groups or particular demographics. The mass distribution of mass media gives it the most pervasive and most consistent reach of all forms of media, and is therefore the primary source through which Canadians nationwide learn about localized events – Hérouxville, for instance.

Of course, alternative and independent publications are essential for maintaining media diversity and filling in crucial gaps, and multiculturalism is already being hotly debated by members of the public in a variety of different settings – community forums, academic settings and various online media, among others. Nonetheless, the mass media are responsible for clarifying and framing debates in a responsible way and with all Canadians in mind, particularly for constitutional issues concerning everyone from Vancouver Island to Nunavut to downtown Toronto. In the case of nationally-relevant debates, the two national dailies should ask questions instead of perpetuate dogma, both for the sake of and in the voice of the public.

Among the two papers, only in Margeret Wenté's *Globe* commentary was the question of increasing tensions concerning ethnic segregation and social integration raised. "Social cohesion is exactly what's at risk, and that's why people are getting a bit anxious."¹⁰

In early January, Marina Jimenez, the *Globe's* immigration reporter, summarized the findings of a recent University of Toronto study, writing: "visible-minority immigrants are slower to integrate into Canadian society than their white, European counterparts"¹¹. A number of reports and articles printed in the *Globe* at about the same time served – unintentionally – to frame the Hérouxville incident as a symptom of a continuing problem, one that could threaten the proper functioning of Canadian democracy itself¹²⁻¹⁷.

That ethnic integration is a problem is something that virtually everyone can agree upon, and this is the question of multiculturalism itself. The Hérouxville incident, if anything, should serve as indication that our policy of multiculturalism needs to be clarified, not merely for the sake of future generations but for us in the present as well. Without asking what those policies entail, the form of cultural integration we want our country to take will remain obscured, and without departing from partisan lines, integration and cooperation will remain forever at a standstill. Genuine dialogue – a necessary condition for democracy – will not occur.

The media cannot therefore rest content as a bullhorn for partisan opinion. It should remind us that we all ultimately want the same thing – a peaceful, democratic and well-integrated society – and identify the sources of the subsequent partisan divide, along with other perspectives that might previously have been ignored. It should remind us that the question of how to achieve integration while maintaining uniqueness and difference is the crucial issue underlying both multiculturalism and democracy in general, and that without asking this question, Canadian democracy, as fundamentally based on principles of cultural diversity and integration, can only regress.

In light of all this, media responsibility will be of paramount importance in achieving the world we want. It must cease from its partisan tendencies as well as actively work to transgress partisan divisions in general. If not, we will have left democracy to the vicissitudes of chance and at the mercy of demagogues.

Notes:

- 1 Hamilton, Graeme. "Welcome! Leave your Customs at the Door." *National Post*, January 30, 2007. [<http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=bca2b544-518e-4163-a29d-4fe8c23d1910&k=958491>] (March 30, 2007)
- 2 "Meet the immigrants of Hérouxville: Three non-whites absorbed into rural life." *The Globe and Mail*, February 7, 2007: A5.
- 3 "The battle of Hérouxville." *National Post*, February 7, 2007: A16.
- 4 Martin, Don. "Canada comes first. The old country comes second." *National Post*, February 2, 2007: A13.
- 5 Gagnon, Lysiane. "Little Mosque in Quebec." *The Globe and Mail*, February 19, 2007: A15.
- 6 "The message is sent: You're not fit to stay." *The Globe and Mail*, February 10, 2007: A26.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 "L'affaire Hérouxville born out of fear: experts." *Montreal Gazette*, January 30, 2007. [<http://www.canada.com/montrealgazette/story.html?id=5f214257-aa7b-4206-9903-04d0eao68c7b>] (March 30, 2007)
- 8 Barber, John. "Values up for grabs in a multicultural future." *The Globe and Mail*, March 14, 2007: A15.
- 9 Wente, Margerat. "The lesson from Hérouxville." *The Globe and Mail*, February 8, 2007: A17.
- 10 "How Canadian are you?; Visible-minority immigrants and their children identify less and less with the country, report says." *The Globe and Mail*, January 12, 2007: A1.
- 11 "Children of immigrants and the issue of identity." *The Globe and Mail*, January 15, 2007: A16.
- 12 "Common values key to equality, book says." *The Globe and Mail*, February 8, 2007: A9.
- 13 "Do ethnic enclaves impede integration?" *The Globe and Mail*, February 8, 2007: A8.
- 14 "How does multiculturalism translate for minorities?" *The Globe and Mail*, January 12, 2007: A5.
- 15 "Immigrants and integration – is the city ready to listen?" *The Globe and Mail*, January 16, 2007: A11.
- 16 Simpson, Jeffrey. "Robust immigration isn't working as it once did." *The Globe and Mail*, February 23, 2007: A21.
- 17 Reinhart, Anthony. "'We looked around and we saw the ceiling.'" *The Globe and Mail*, January 15, 2007: A12.