

THE KULCHUR KRISIS

In the first quarter of this century, in a statement sandwiched between two bloody world wars, Julian Benda said that what defines our age is not any shared set of natural beliefs, but "the organization of political hatreds."

He saw coming our modern rejection of universal ideals, and the resulting embrace of raw political Will, ethnic egoism, and (multi)cultural nationalism. In this light, perhaps one of the most fatuous official pronouncement imaginable came [1995] from Canadian "Multiculturalism" Minister Sheila Finestone, who declared that "there isn't any one Canadian identity. Canada has no national culture." She said there is no unity, then proposed the illogical and perverse notion that unity is plurality. But Canada has always been as diversely peopled as could be imagined, and without a central focus of commanding ideals, might easily have fragmented into cultural tribalism. Ethnic feuds over body type and blood. Ethnic struggles based on the dangerous notion that origin is destiny - rather like the P.Q. notion of the "people." What saved us was the deep faith of our founders that British classical liberal ideals were better - far better - than competing ideals. And so it is rather paradoxical that the modern liberal party of Ms Finestone has vigorously rejected those ideals for a kind of culture-is-only-a-T-shirt notion, that in effect trivializes real culture, forswears any superiority of ideals, and substitutes ethnics for ethics.

British-forged ideals provided a kind of supra-culture that found a natural home in Canada, whose founders, whether English, French, Scots, or German, no matter, were resolved to create a single nation (not two, as the myth goes). Their great resolve, as author of Canada's First Century, historian Donald Creighton put it, "was not the perpetuation of cultural diversity but the establishment of a united nation." The first ideal was the faith that universals outside and above us all, such as the good, the true, and the beautiful could serve as a powerful solvent to unify everyone despite the particularities of private culture. Political and social peace would come from encouraging natural self-completion in the search for these things, however unequal might be the practical results. Truth is discovered by individuals, not engineered by governments. That's deep culture (though not to liberal liking).

Secondly, the above can only happen in the context of a Rule of Law, equal for all, that refuses to privilege racial or cultural differences. The only people in the modern world to have developed such a complex tradition of first principles were the British, who from Magna Carta, to Blackstone's Commentaries, forged the common law, democracy, free parliaments, the jury system, habeas corpus, and the presumption of innocence (in deadly opposition to the Roman civil codes of Europe that presume guilt). All this is a framework for the protection of individuals and their civil societies - against governments. A grand culture, I'd say.

While Canada's first experiment under this ideal, embodied in the French reality, has been troublesome, it is important to remember the hopeful founding mood. Just as English Canadians were frightened of the U.S. experiment in democracy that led to civil war, French Canadians were frightened of the half-century of despotism and French terror that dominated European politics. All were united in cherishing the practical

wisdom of the English Constitution as the unifying, supra-cultural vehicle. Even the phrase "Je Me Souviens," which is widely thought to indicate a longing for Montcalm, has a poignant origin. It comes from a poem by the architect of the Quebec Legislature building, Eugene Tache, who wrote proudly "Je Me Souviens, Que Ne Sous Le lys, Je Fleuris Sous La Rose": "I remember, that born under the [French] lily, I flourish under the [English] rose." My bet is that French Canadians will vote for the culture of the rose again.

Thirdly, it was especially the Christian religion that united and shaped Canada. Close to 90 per cent of Canadians - including the vast majority of inuit and native people - continue to declare "Christian" as their faith. Sheila may have no culture, but deep in the everyday consensus of Canadian manners and mores, is the profound, if unacknowledged presence of the spirit and work of Christ, of St. Augustine, of St. Thomas. Religious culture has been a powerful unifying force for Canadians, and remains so.

Last, there is the indelibly beautiful and character-moulding, even heroic language, literature, art and architecture of our Western tradition. The names of Da vinci, Michelangelo, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Balzac, Wordsworth, Rodin; of Chartres, Westminster, the Louvre, Beethoven, Handel, Bach; of the charitable societies, the great schools, the universities, all, all sprang from...our Culture. It is almost too rich to bear.

Multiculturalism, affirmative action, quotas, all such flawed policies are a direct attack on this culture, a movement away from common universal ideals, toward parochial nationalisms and legal favouritism based on race and blood. Ms Finestone has as deep a reason as any to fear her own philosophy.