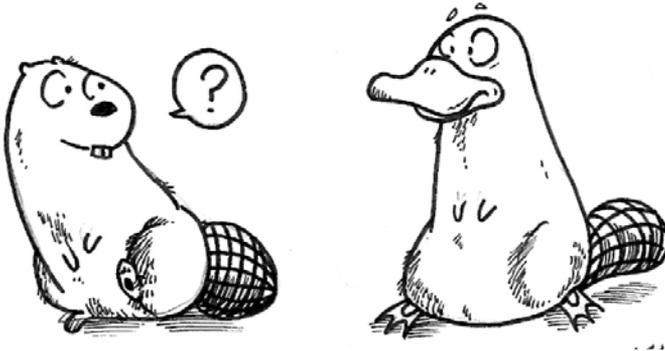


CHAPTER NINE

Identity neurosis? Just change channels



***Narrator:** Our heroes have concluded that both by accident and by design, their Model C world is full of blockages to accommodating the diversity challenges facing the country. Canada’s chronic identity neurosis and a new and re-energized sense of self-doubt are setting in. Perhaps the sceptics are right and Model C is not sustainable after all. The moment seems appropriate to peer deeper into the troubling question of Canadians’ identity insecurity. Team Diversity Canada does exactly that, but very carefully. Everyone has his or her private identity neurosis to deal with.*

Suraiya: My favourite technique for dealing with identity insecurity is **the two-identities formula.**

I just keep two options in my back pocket and I draw on each as needed. I have an ethnic, religious and language identity package for use at home and with my extended family. I try to visit my country of birth every few of years to recall and reawaken that side of my identity and to take a cultural bath in our family origins. Those trips are always fun but they can get a little claustrophobic towards the end and the longer I stay abroad, the more Canadian I feel. Those visits remind me how fortunate I am to have the option to operate outside that identi-kit when I return to Canada. Back at work and with colleagues and friends who are not part of my roots community, I drop

most of that and switch to the behaviour and language profile that I picked up in the schoolyard and at university. “Like, well, you know what I mean, eh?” The rest of the time I just muddle through trying not to give, or to take, offence at any transgressions along the way.



The two-identities formula

Veronica: Oh Suraiya, you are so well-adjusted. Bravo! Not everyone can pull that off. But there is another way of handling that bi-cultural conflict. It is to **go hybrid** ...no options in the back pocket, cherry-pick your favourite identity-traits from whatever is passing by. Just let it all roll over you and develop a blend of the various models you run across. Compromise, compromise, compromise. It’s pure Canadian! I do it all the time and no one looks at me funny... except my frozen-in-time parents who consider me a lost cause in any case. It teaches flexibility. And frankly I feel more comfortable than I think I would if I were going bi-cultural as you have done. I suppose in the end there is not much difference and what works best, is whatever works best. Personal choice wins again.

Henri: Well it seems that you two lost souls aren’t so lost after all. But just because I am an LEC don’t think I haven’t as much right as you newcomers, to an identity neurosis of my own. There are lots of LECs who think that they need to be something other than just Canadian, or something in addition to Canadian. An add-on optional extra kind of thing. Any number of First Nations, Quebecois, and hyphenated Canadians *ne savent pas sur quel pied danser*. – they don’t know which foot to lead with. They are the ones who are really hung up on protecting or reaffirming their root identities. They resist almost everything that might threaten that. Speaking English for example, can be viewed as a traitorous act in *La Belle Province*. Just being integrated into the local tapestry is considered by some as treasonous, as a threat to their well-being or their status... or their cultural rights as the Professor points out. They see integration as the first step towards assimilation and as assimilation as a deal-breaker. What they don’t seem to understand is that that is OK with the rest of us, who cares anyway? Maybe.

Becoming Canadian can be particularly threatening to those newcomers who want to shelter their cultural traditions from assimilation. Assimilation in Canada? Remember the fuzziness factor? Canada’s cultural identity can too subtle for those whose cultural traditions are more clearly defined. Canadian-ness can sneak up on you. It is subliminal and pernicious. The first sign that it’s happening to you is when you say sorry to the guy who accidentally steps on your foot as he is getting into the elevator. Game’s over, you’re one of us now. Too bad!

John: You’re right. Henri, we like to apologize. That is who we are. Remember? It’s what makes us so quaint. If you are not mobilized by sentiments of guilt (that’s guilt with a “u”) then you should turn in your passport. Guilt is Us. If your neighbour is identity-neurotic, then you should be allowed your identity neurosis too. Otherwise its not really fair, is it?

Sarah Crowchild: Whenever I need to deal with my identity neurosis, I do it by merely **changing channels**.

Sometimes I feel like I am running on about four channels. First is the personal/family channel for the at home identity-culture package. This is Suraiya’s first option, I think. I can also switch over to the local public-space channel and employ the *behavioural* rules for interaction at work, for dealing with friends and other day-to-day affairs. It’s just like Suraiya does. This second channel can be dominated by

provincial or municipal or regional rules and the lines between them are vague and with lots of overlap. But you know what I mean if you live in Victoria and spend a weekend in Edmonton or Halifax... they talk funny and drive their cars differently and see the same things differently too.

I call my third channel our very own CNN, Canada’s National Network channel. It is for things pan-Canadian, the national conversation channel for taxes, politics, hockey, weather and other complaints.

Finally, channel four is my international channel... when we are *not* on home ice. Because so much of our channel four experience takes place on the TV and over the internet, I call it the global-commercial channel. I think my kids have figured this out already and that is why I am not overly concerned when they watch too much made-in-USA television. Somehow they seem to understand that US is not us.

Henri: The Sarah Crowchild four-channel universe, I love it! But you know, even for this shared-mainstream LEC, channel four is the prime source of my cultural-identity neurosis. Although I don’t always like it, it is where international business is transacted and has become the indispensable medium for tracking what is going on in the world and for participating in it too. This is the channel that can seduce, overwhelm, hypnotize with its consumerism-defined omnipresence in our lives. Neurosis Central. Unless, as you said Sarah, we keep reminding ourselves that it is just one of a multiplicity of choices. But if we let our guard down, those global brands will indeed homogenize our brains, our cultures and our tastes in ways that best suit the profit motives of mass commerce. This is the same discussion and the same kind of challenge that we spoke of in terms of ensuring shelf space for Canadian-origin books, magazines and films. Those are the ideas and products that would not make it into our market space if only maximized profits dictated their availability. In Canada the most visible manifestation of that contest for access to ideas which are not driven by the marketplace is in public radio and television... CBC, Radio Canada and TV Ontario for example. Sarah’s Channel Three... home, sweet home.

The Professor: Did you say CBC runs without catering to the commercial marketplace? *Puleese!* But you know what drives my identity insecurity? It’s when we **give it all away in the name of accommodating others.**

Sikh Mounties in turbans? Schoolboys with legal knives under their

shirts? What’s next, schoolteachers in Burkas? Is nothing sacred in this insipid country... or should I ask is everything sacred? Last I heard, the Mountie uniform was about being a Canadian police officer, not about being a religious police officer. I wonder if the government-issue RCMP hijab will fit over the traditional RCMP hat, or under it.

Romek: But let’s look at the kind of things remaining on the list of diversity friendly Canadian symbols... the only ones we can still embrace without betraying our secular, negative-nationalism rules. Beavers, maple leaves, hockey, winter (disappearing fast) and the expression “eh!” And that’s about it. We can’t even build an Inukshuk around here without offending the cultural sensitivities of its Inuit inventors. And all those religious dress accessories that showcase who you pray to for everlasting salvation! If it irritates or frightens some of us, can’t the zealots just keep it out of sight and avoid the fuss? I wonder who is being rigid on this one, the wearers or the viewers? **If it is already legitimate and normal to be different in Model C, why is there a need to declare your difference?**

Why did we stop smoking in public places? Because it irritates and sickens the non-smokers. As far as I can tell we’re better off for that new level of respect for each other’s air quality. Stay the course, I say. Smoke at home all you want, if your family will let you. Same rules apply for religious dress and accoutrements, do it at home.

Youssef: Your argument is really timely, Romek. Wrong but timely. I guess those who feel more comfortable wearing their religious or traditional dress in public, do so exactly because it responds to their need for some kind of specific identity label in this country where there is so much identity insecurity. Or rather, no distinguishing identity. I am not sure why it is incompatible to have a religion and be a citizen of a secular state at the same time. We’re not talking about running the place just because our women wear a hijab. We are talking about who we are as members of an international religious community; a religious movement even. If we must abandon those symbols to earn legitimacy, then we start feeling vulnerable to the appetite of the great assimilation monster... that we will disappear into the void of the stripped down citizenship you have mentioned. Model C. Maybe you’re right, **being Canadian just doesn’t carry enough identity to describe myself fully.**



Being Canadian doesn't carry enough identity

But describing myself as Canadian plus my religion, should not be a problem... I hope.

Romek: But by telling us through your dress or in other ways, that being Canadian is not good enough for you, you are belittling the very society that gives you the freedoms that we newcomers came here to enjoy. And you must know that **it is difficult not to read some forms of overtly religious dress as a political statement.**

That's especially if the religion in question is viewed as calling for rules of comportment which are incompatible with gender equality and the laws and human rights that democratic societies fought so long to put in place. My guess is that those will be the very rights that inspired you to leave friends and family and make your future in this country. **Dealing with your personal identity insecurity by dressing to display your own reference points, generates a counterpart identity insecurity for the rest of us.**

That is the reason for this conversation. You make me feel insecure and suspicious that your project is political, that you want to impose your package of religious laws and un-freedoms on we secular and other infidels. How many Islamic dominated countries are there in the world where Islam is an actual choice, an option? I can think of

one, maybe two. Rational or not, that realization is in the back of my mind when I see hijabs, niqabs and burqas on the street. Even Turkey is having a hard time maintaining its secular tradition; the Muslim enthusiasts want an Islamic state. When women insist that the hijab, the niqab and the burqa are worn as a matter of choice, that they are not imposed by their fathers or big brothers, well then they are maybe confirming that such headgear is inappropriate for this society. They are telling us that the garment is voluntary or wilful compliance to a religious obligation. Is that submission to your religion or to its men folk? And wilful submission, is that not just another way of saying intimidation? The experts tell us that the Koran dress code does not speak of anything other than appropriately modest covering. Women in Model C are no longer expected to be voluntarily submissive and those who are, queer the gender equality project for the rest of us. I repeat: submission at home if you must, but don’t advertise it downtown please!

Suraiya: But Romek, surely **almost any kind of dress can be given the submission label** the way that you have just employed it. Is not John’s necktie submission to the commercial-business establishment that commands him and his thoughts for his entire working day? And when that cute little receptionist in your own front office appears at work in her mini skirt, décolleté and bare midriff, are you going to tell me that she is not submitting to some kind of degrading sexist commercialization of all women? And speaking of gender equality, I don’t see any guys coming to work dressed like that, exposing half of their more-than-substantial body parts. Thank all of our gods for that! At least those religion-inspired dress codes, if they err at all, err on the side of modest. Maybe you should just **accept the hijab as a fashion statement rather than a political one.**

Narrator: Having exhausted the dress code factors of everyone’s identity insecurity, your discussants decided that before things got too rough and the gloves come off along with the hijabs, it was time to pick up the remote and change channels for their next encounter. But rather than looking for a quick-fix for dealing with their identity insecurities, the coming tenth round is going to be about flagging the successful bits of the Canadian non-model. This may be a brief discussion.