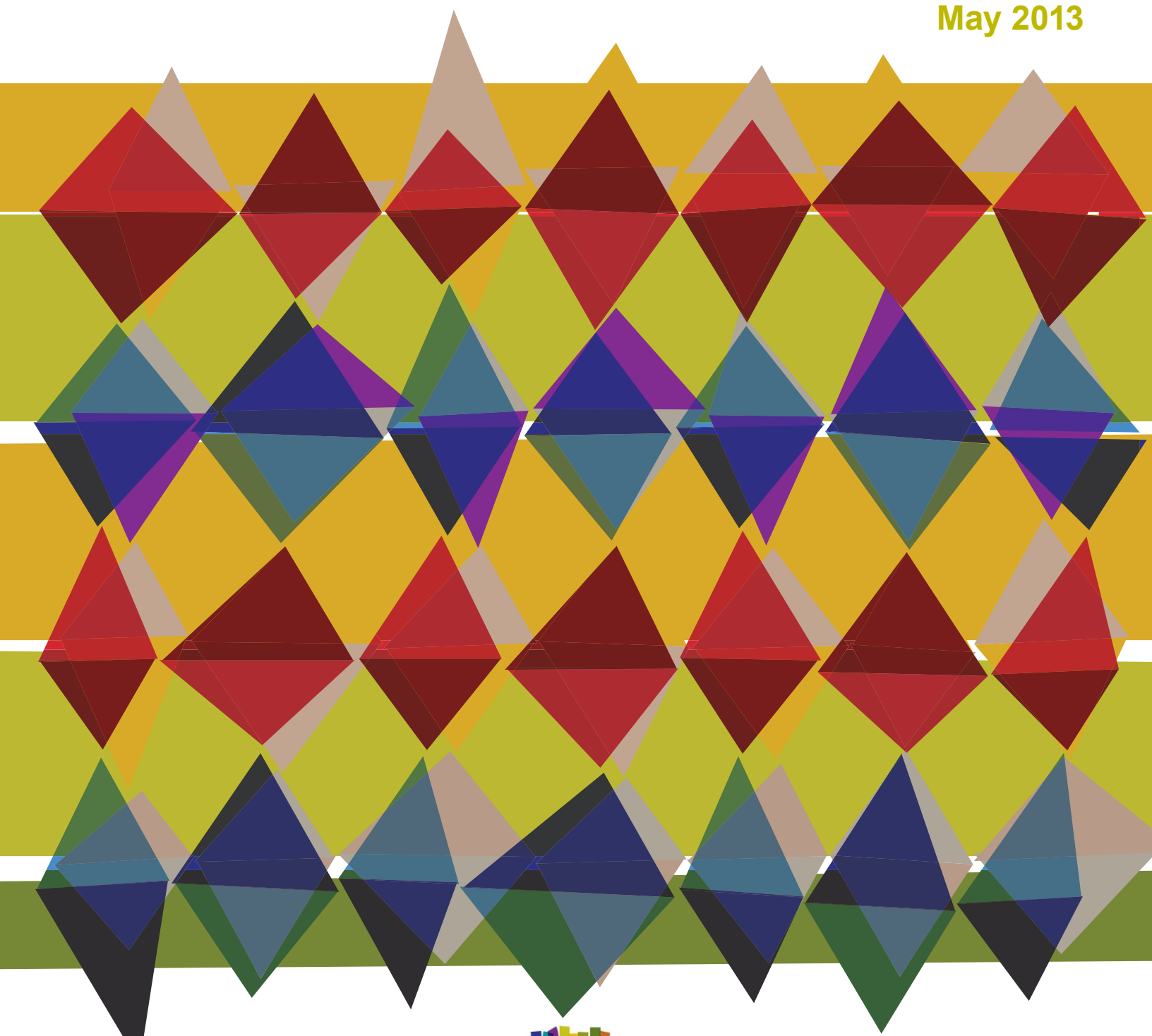


WHAT IS PLURALISM?

Inspirit Foundation discussion paper
on pluralism in Canada

May 2013



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Founded in 2012, the [Inspirit Foundation](#) is a national, grant-making organization that works to encourage pluralism in Canada among young adults of different spiritual, religious and secular beliefs. Inspirit views pluralism as an approach that strives to recognize, understand and engage with each other's differences of culture, ethnicity, beliefs and other elements of identity.

This paper aims to:

- Contribute to a conversation on pluralism that focuses particularly on these questions:
 - > *Why is pluralism important to social change in Canada?*
 - > *Can we speak of a "Canadian pluralism" based on our shared history and particular characteristics of Canadian society?*
- Share how the Inspirit Foundation works to encourage pluralism in Canada as an approach that strives to recognize, understand and engage with each other's differences, including differences related to beliefs, as an element of identity.

Pluralism and social change

The Inspirit Foundation takes as a starting point the rich tapestry of Canadian society as being valuable and positive. Present day Canadian society has emerged through the historical contribution of individuals and communities of diverse backgrounds. However, over the past few decades in particular, there has been much public and media commentary pointing to differences in culture, ethnicity, beliefs and other elements of identity as sources of social and political tension, both in Canada and globally. Inspirit seeks to address this important issue of differences in peoples' identities by finding constructive ways for engagement that can promote understanding and cooperation with the goal of a more inclusive and just Canada. The Foundation's position is that pluralism can be an approach that facilitates interaction and creates space for debate in a constructive and safe manner.

The Inspirit Foundation views pluralism as an approach that strives to recognize, understand and engage with each other's differences of culture, ethnicity, beliefs and other elements of identity.

The notion of pluralism draws on a rich intellectual tradition that regards diversity as valuable (e.g. Berlin 1969). It is an approach to social change which posits that the engagement of diversity can produce positive outcomes. As Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen have claimed, pluralism "...has come to represent a powerful ideal meant to resolve the question of how to get along in a conflict-ridden world..." (Bender and Klassen 2010: 2). The Inspirit Foundation's notion of pluralism in Canada follows upon this basic premise that positive engagement with diversity is important.

Inspirit also draws from and builds on various insights of pluralism that can be found in other places around the world. For instance, inspired by the example of Canada's inclusive approach to diversity, the [Global Centre for Pluralism](#) is working to advance respect for diversity worldwide, believing that openness and understanding towards the cultures, social structures, values and faiths of other peoples are essential to the survival of an interdependent

world. There have also been significant efforts in the U.S. For example, the Pluralism Project at Harvard University builds on the work of scholars such as Diane L. Eck whose seminal description of pluralism as “the energetic engagement with diversity” and “the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference” resonates with the Inspirit Foundation’s efforts to facilitate and encourage pluralism as an approach that can bridge relationships between people and communities of different beliefs. Inspirit builds on these examples of influential scholarship (and the activism they inspire) to utilize the concept of pluralism to construct stronger bonds for understanding, learning, engaging and working across differences of beliefs.

Pluralism in Canada and possibilities for “Canadian pluralism”

The Inspirit Foundation is interested in developing the concept of “Canadian pluralism” as an approach that is characterized by, and aims to incorporate sensitivity to, the unique historical and geographical processes that crafted and continue to shape contemporary Canadian society.

While there have been numerous efforts at various community and governmental levels to address and promote cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, people’s beliefs and religions have received relatively less attention and resource support.

-Kunz and Sykes

Canada has a strong history and a commitment to human rights as they apply to preservation of cultural identity. Will Kymlicka has noted that there are constant references to Canadian “success” or the Canadian “model” in promoting diversity (Kymlicka 2004), and Inspirit acknowledges and seeks to build on what has been accomplished in Canada thus far. By supporting pluralism with respect to people’s beliefs, Inspirit is taking on the challenge posed by Kymlicka to “think more critically about what we can do to promote the underlying conditions that sustain the Canadian model” (Kymlicka 2004: 852). Inspirit’s interest in fostering pluralism in Canada is in order to strengthen those conditions that sustain diversity, and even advances, more involved engagement in Canadian society. Inspirit believes that one important condition for diversity is some degree of social awareness and willingness among individuals to see diversity as valuable and worthy of attention to Canadian society.

Much work is still needed in this area because, while there have been numerous efforts at various community and governmental levels to address and promote cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, people’s beliefs and religions have received relatively less attention and resource support (Kunz and Sykes 2009: 10-11). Inspirit asserts that belief should be recognized as an important component of an individual’s identity, along with other elements of identity (such as ethnicity, culture and gender).

For clarity, Inspirit’s emphasis on belief does not diminish its interest in promoting pluralism on a broader scope. This is why Inspirit proposes the concept of Canadian pluralism as an approach that strives to recognize, understand and engage with each other’s individual differences, including differences related to culture, ethnicity, beliefs and other elements of identity that are recognized and protected through various policies, programs and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

How the Inspirit Foundation works

The Inspirit Foundation currently supports pluralism through initiatives that provide young adults (aged 18 to 30) with opportunities to learn and to build relationships with individuals and communities of different spiritual, religious and secular backgrounds. For instance, the foundation supports projects that bring young people of different beliefs together to achieve a common goal in their community. Inspirit also supports activities where young people can learn about the variety of beliefs in Canada, and activities that encourage conversations about the role of belief in Canadian society. In addition, Inspirit supports projects that equip and empower young adults with the capacity to instill and lead their generation in working towards progressive change. In this manner, Inspirit's work aims to foster a healthy and productive appreciation of Canada's diversity.

Lessons learned from this experimentation, which is in early stages, will be shared with interested parties. The Inspirit Foundation is very interested in learning the ways in which its approach to pluralism can be measured – whether engagement with each other's differences contributes to the empowerment of a generation of informed and involved young leaders.

Have your say

Inspirit hopes to engage different sectors of society in a discussion about pluralism and how it can positively contribute to a more inclusive and stronger Canada.

If you are reading this paper you may have an interest in pluralism or may have done work or research related to it. Inspirit would like to hear your thoughts on the issues raised in this paper.

To discuss your views related to this paper, please write to Ian Barnard, at ibarnard@inspiritfoundation.org.



To watch a video created by Inspirit in which young Canadians speak to what pluralism means to them, please visit http://www.inspiritfoundation.org/en/about-inspirit/what_is_pluralism

To join the conversation online, please use the hashtag #WhatIsPluralism.

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