

Douglas Todd: Are we hunkering down in the face of ethnic diversity?

Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam says public officials need to face the problem

BY DOUGLAS TODD, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 7, 2014 4:02 PM



Vancouver's Engaged City Task Force recommends neighbourhood potlucks, Just Say Hello campaigns and more long communal tables at restaurants to make the community more welcoming to immigrants, as well as existing residents.

Photograph by: Steve Bosch, Vancouver Sun

Are you engaged with your community? Or are you hunkering down?

Are you connecting with friends, volunteering or involved in politics? Or are you drawing into yourself,

“like a turtle?”

Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam has completed an important study of more than 30,000 North Americans and concluded that — especially if you live in ethnically diverse cities such as Toronto, Vancouver or Los Angeles — it’s likely you are “hunkering down.”

That’s the colloquial phrase that Putnam, who has been an adviser to everyone from Bill Clinton and Tony Blair to the U.S. State Department and the World Bank, uses to describe the lack of trust he discovered among most North Americans in diverse urban settings.

Since geographers rank Greater Toronto and Metro Vancouver respectively the third and fourth most “hyper-diverse” cities in the world — more than 45 per cent of the residents of each metropolis are born outside the country — Putnam’s findings are more than relevant to these regions.

Indeed, when the Vancouver Foundation recently conducted a massive survey of Metro Vancouver residents, researchers discovered most people in this West Coast city feel unusually high levels of loneliness and lack of friends.

Even though Putnam realized the results of his own research into diversity challenged his pro-multicultural values, he still holds hope that immigration may have long-term benefits in North America if handled responsibly by politicians. Some Canadian politicians are starting to respond.

Still, the author of the classic book *Bowling Alone*, which chronicles the decline in civil engagement in North America since the 1950s, has felt contradictory feelings as his findings have been confirmed by researchers in Canada, Sweden, Peru, Pakistan, Kenya and beyond.

He has realized neither of the two dominant North American myths about multiculturalism are accurate.

In contrast to conservatives’ beliefs, Putnam says multicultural diversity doesn’t necessarily lead to open “conflict” among people of different ethnic groups. “Race riots” and violence do not necessarily break out.

On the other hand, contrary to liberals’ dreams, Putnam did not find people of different ethnicities inevitably discover “harmony” or enjoy “fusion.”

Putnam’s survey of 41 American cities and towns found people in ethnically diverse regions tend to be more quiet and polite — but also disengaged and wary.

While Putnam believes there may be long-term benefits for some from immigration (including enhanced scientific and intellectual innovation), he’s convinced the short-term effect on most cities is a drop in “social capital.”

People in diverse urban regions tend to seek shelter in their own little worlds. “Diversity, at least in the short run, seems to bring out the turtle in all of us. ... The more ethnically diverse the people we live around, the less we trust them.”

Putnam adds an additional disturbing discovery — that “in-group trust, too, is lower in more diverse settings.” In other words, people also become more distrustful even of members of their own ethnic group.

“Inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbours, regardless of the colour of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, vote less ... have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television,” Putnam writes in his report *E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st century*.

The Vancouver Foundation survey of 3,800 diverse Metro residents confirmed Putnam’s results. It found one in four Metro residents feels alone more often than they would like, one-third consider Vancouver a difficult place to make friends, most don’t socialize with their neighbours, half don’t volunteer and most feel that, while diversity is generally a good thing, they prefer to be with members of their own ethnic group.

More than half of respondents, of all ethnicities, also agreed that Vancouver is becoming a resort town for the wealthy and that there is too much foreign ownership of real estate.

Since Putnam first uncovered his “inconvenient truths” about the downside of diversity, he has extensively “kicked the tires” of his studies to see if other reasons could explain a lack of mutual regard in multicultural societies.

But he’s failed to find evidence to contradict his own findings. Indeed, many others have confirmed them, including Harvard economist Edward Glaeser, author of *Triumph of the City*; American academics Edward Miguel, Matthew Kahn and Dora Costa; and Oxford economist Paul Collier, author of *Exodus: How Migration is Changing the World*.

As Putnam summarizes, higher diversity leads to “lower confidence in local government, local leaders and the local news media ... less expectation others will cooperate to solve dilemmas ... less likelihood of working on a community project ... lower likelihood of giving to charity ... and less happiness and lower perceived quality of life.”

One of the most serious downsides of greater diversity, emphasize Putnam and others, is people become more reluctant to pay taxes.

Glaeser, Collier and others have discovered higher ethnic diversity leads to more reluctance to redistribute wealth. In high-immigrant societies, Glaeser found the relatively well-off have less empathy for those on lower incomes because they don’t see them as being basically like themselves.

Collier is among those who speculates decades-long anti-tax campaigns in California — which have led to decaying road systems and battered public schools — could relate to the state’s high ethnic diversity. California has more immigrants than any other U.S. state.

What's to be done? The first thing Putnam seeks is that people on the political right and left get over their blind spots.

"It would be unfortunate if a politically correct progressivism were to deny the reality of the challenge to social solidarity posed by diversity," writes Putnam.

"It would be equally unfortunate if an historical and ethnocentric conservatism were to deny that addressing that challenge is both feasible and desirable."

Putnam's ideas for overcoming the divisive effects of diversity demand going beyond "tolerance"; they focus on "creating more opportunities for meaningful interaction across ethnic lines."

Last month Vancouver city council seemed to heed Putnam's suggestions in a small way when it created a "citizen's assembly" for the Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood.

Mayor Gregor Robertson also began to champion a "Mayors Engaged City Task Force," which will look at ways to make the region less alienating for existing residents and immigrants.

The task force's proposals include sponsoring neighbourhood potlucks, adding more "communal" tables to restaurants and redesigning condominiums for enhanced human interaction.

Putnam, in addition, stresses that governments need to help North American immigrants improve their English (or French) and better fund overwhelmed educational and health facilities.

Transcending the mistrust associated with ethnic diversity will not come quickly or easily. But Putnam remains hopeful it can be done if public officials more frankly face the problem, adjust immigration levels and become more creative.

As a liberal, Putnam puts faith in the advice of the 19th-century sociologist Max Weber, who stressed civil societies can slowly overcome intransigent predicaments — because "politics is a slow boring of hard boards."

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