



# Report on the Public Symposium:

## Towards a Multiculturalism Policy

Wednesday, October 13, 2010,  
Centre of Excellence, Macoya

Ministry of the Arts & Multiculturalism  
February 02, 2011

## 1.0 OVERVIEW

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### 1.1 The International Genesis of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism was conceptualised by countries including Canada, Australia, Germany and the United Kingdom, to treat with issues of inclusion, civil rights and unrest amongst immigrant communities and their descendants. It is important that Trinidad and Tobago understand that its developmental path is different to these countries.

### 1.2 The Policy Context

Multiculturalism as articulated by these nations is not directly applicable to us. Consequently, we must seek to develop our own approach to Multiculturalism and not mimic what these nations have done. We must also be sure to include relevant legislation and policies with the Multiculturalism Policy. Support for the artist and the creation of a fertile environment in which various artforms can flourish is also an important consideration that must not be overlooked in this process. The Ministry's intention is to develop a policy framework that positions Multiculturalism as the primary policy in the Cultural Sector. Multiculturalism was identified as the concept which encompasses diversity in all its forms. While the Policy Framework will include Arts and Heritage, Multiculturalism will be the overarching policy whose objectives include the fostering of inclusion, equitable resource distribution, and the celebration of cultural diversity. The Cultural Policy and the Policy on Grants and Subventions will emanate from the Multiculturalism Policy.

### 1.3 The Symposium

The Symposium was organised into several sessions that facilitated discourse on the history of Trinidad and Tobago in regard to its rich ethnic background, the regional and international discourse amongst academics and policy makers and the perspective of local intellectuals on Multiculturalism. The presentations were as follows:

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#### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Dr. Bridget Brereton: Multiculturalism in Trinidad and Tobago: Historical Perspectives

#### PLENARY SESSION I – The International Perspective

Dr. Jack Jedwab: Canada's Multicultural Debate & Its Evolving Policy  
Mr. Sayed Shah: Multiculturalism in the British Context  
Dr. Jack Menke: Nation creation: A viable option for the Caribbean?  
Dr. Dennison Moore: Towards a Multiculturalism Policy for Trinidad and Tobago

#### PLENARY SESSION II & III – Local Perspectives

Dr. Rhoda Reddock: Reflections on the Meanings of Multiculturalism for Trinidad and Tobago  
Pr. John La Guerre: Thoughts on Multiculturalism  
Pr. Patricia Mohammed: The Usual Suspects: Beyond the Fossilized Signifiers of Nation and Culture  
Dr. Paula Morgan: In the Aftermath of Trauma: Crafting Cultural Policy in the Caribbean

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## SUMMARY OF THE PROCEEDINGS

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### 2.0 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The major historical developments that made Trinidad and Tobago an ethnically and culturally diverse society are tied to the arrival of the following peoples to our islands: the Indigenous Peoples (inclusive of the Arawakan and Cariban speaking communities), the Europeans (especially the Spanish, French, British and Portuguese), the African (inclusive of Orisha and French-Creole and Tobagonian culture), Indians (with large influxes of Hindus and Muslims), Chinese (who primarily spoke Cantonese) and Syrian Lebanese and other West Indian immigrants. Though the ethnic origin of forms is valid way to begin categorising them, many have gone beyond that and cater to all types of ethnicities.

### 3.0 PANEL DISCUSSIONS

#### **3.1 PLENARY SESSION I – The International and Regional Perspectives**

The Presenters for this session focussed on several issues including the following:

– **Issues of Definition:**

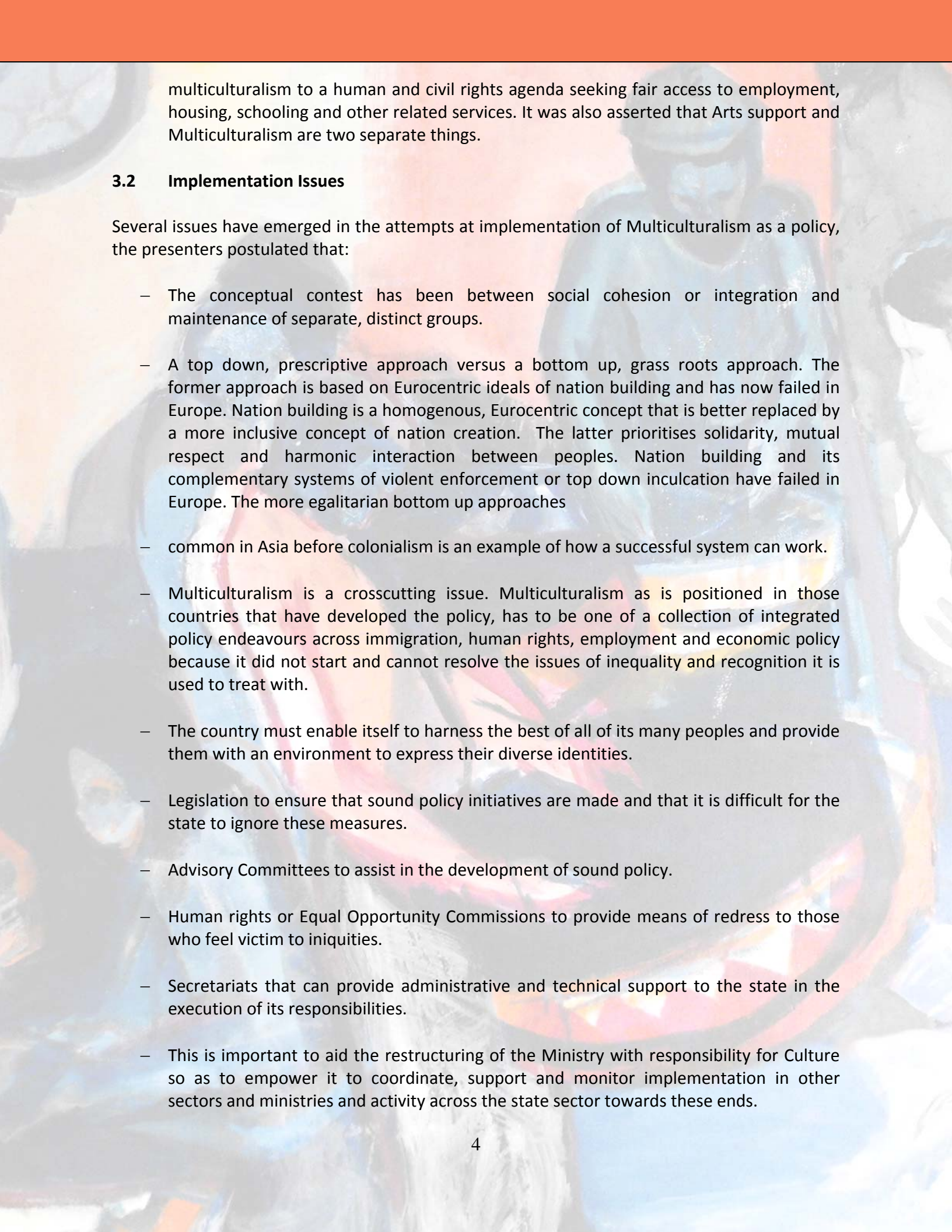
An overarching, common definition of Multiculturalism was not arrived at. The risk with Multiculturalism is that the term can mean many things to many people. For some, it is the idea that several cultures can exist in the same country at the same time. Others articulated it in a theoretical framework that conforms to a factual or demographic descriptor (i.e. many states have more than one ethnic group within it), a normative use (that asserts the celebration of diversity) and as government policy (with specific measures to manage ethnic diversity).

– **Genesis:**

The genesis of Multicultural policymaking is usually located in the 1960s when the Anglophone world of the Global North began to treat with integration and the cultural presence of large populations of migrants originally brought into their countries as labourers. The concern here was the degree of integration to be afforded to immigrants and their offspring, and human rights and discrimination issues. Multiculturalism was often resorted to as a means to resolve civil unrest like riots that were seen as a reaction of minorities to discriminatory practices that they endured.

– **How Multiculturalism has Worked Abroad:**

In England, Multiculturalism meant three key things: common values, equality of opportunity and respect for others. It was an effort to bridge the gap between an economy that needed immigrants and a society that was not yet ready to accommodate them. British employment practices in the Foreign Service have been expanded to include support for immigrants due to appreciation that the service needs to reflect national ethnic composition and the advantage of having a more diverse foreign service to treat with nations of the world. In Canada, measures were articulated that tied



multiculturalism to a human and civil rights agenda seeking fair access to employment, housing, schooling and other related services. It was also asserted that Arts support and Multiculturalism are two separate things.

### 3.2 Implementation Issues

Several issues have emerged in the attempts at implementation of Multiculturalism as a policy, the presenters postulated that:

- The conceptual contest has been between social cohesion or integration and maintenance of separate, distinct groups.
- A top down, prescriptive approach versus a bottom up, grass roots approach. The former approach is based on Eurocentric ideals of nation building and has now failed in Europe. Nation building is a homogenous, Eurocentric concept that is better replaced by a more inclusive concept of nation creation. The latter prioritises solidarity, mutual respect and harmonic interaction between peoples. Nation building and its complementary systems of violent enforcement or top down inculcation have failed in Europe. The more egalitarian bottom up approaches
- common in Asia before colonialism is an example of how a successful system can work.
- Multiculturalism is a crosscutting issue. Multiculturalism as is positioned in those countries that have developed the policy, has to be one of a collection of integrated policy endeavours across immigration, human rights, employment and economic policy because it did not start and cannot resolve the issues of inequality and recognition it is used to treat with.
- The country must enable itself to harness the best of all of its many peoples and provide them with an environment to express their diverse identities.
- Legislation to ensure that sound policy initiatives are made and that it is difficult for the state to ignore these measures.
- Advisory Committees to assist in the development of sound policy.
- Human rights or Equal Opportunity Commissions to provide means of redress to those who feel victim to iniquities.
- Secretariats that can provide administrative and technical support to the state in the execution of its responsibilities.
- This is important to aid the restructuring of the Ministry with responsibility for Culture so as to empower it to coordinate, support and monitor implementation in other sectors and ministries and activity across the state sector towards these ends.

### 3.3 Public Discussion (Comments from Participants):

- Trinidad and Tobago has long history of multiculturalism, pluralism, and intercultural camaraderie that existed long before multiculturalism as a policy was developed.
- Multiculturalism is a response to immigration issues in Canada, and Europe that are not applicable to us.
- We do not want to lose the harmony we have and should avoid embracing a 'top down' structure. When the state gets involved, confusion is the usual result.
- The real issue is how the state deals with the cultural sector.
- There was a definitive call for local expertise to discuss the local condition.

## 4.0 PLENARY SESSIONS II & III – Local Perspectives

### 4.1 Our Context:

Caution was advocated in adopting measures for these countries wholesale, due to their unsuitability for our country. Our national issues are entirely different to those in the metropolitan societies that developed formal Multicultural policies and there was express preference for a proper distribution of state support and recognition to all. The main points raised included:

- **Colonialism:**  
The Caribbean has a history of trauma, forced migration, oppression and loss of culture. The new policy must take into consideration the trauma of history and the notions of social order. Most of the healing is achieved through the creative imagination (e.g. artists, storytellers who reflect the forces of our histories). The policy needs to facilitate confrontation of this trauma.
- **Party Politics in the Post Colonial Era:**  
After colonialism ended, efforts at nation building became inexorably bound with burgeoning political systems that relied on ethnic mobilisation to secure that critical mass necessary to win the constitutional majority. Party Politics is about the distribution of patronage and who gets what, when and how. In our society it is tied to ethnicity in our social structure. Votes can be purchased. Party politics facilitates the acquisition of political power by the purchase of votes via the distribution of patronage almost like financial transactions. This can lead to dissatisfaction by many with their share of the pie along ethnic lines.
- **Possible suppression of intra-group differences:**  
Multiculturalism can force groups into linear representation of history and reinforce definitions of self that were entrenched during the colonial era. It forces groups to adopt static definitions often led by community leaders and forsakes the fluidity that comprises the real world environment. It obscures interculturalisms and hybridities, gender differences, intragroup differences, gender and children's rights because it is based on assumptions of homogeneity within a specified group.
- **The Centrality of the Arts:**  
This initiative was positioned as a chance to secure broad appreciation for all types of artistic endeavours. The range of artforms should cover the traditional ethnic forms (like Soca and Chutney), abstract, hybrid or avant-garde (like some visual art), and foreign artforms (like hip hop) as long as excellence is the common denominator. Broad appreciation of all types of artforms and heritage, celebration of all artforms whether originating here or not and support for excellence in a wide range of endeavours are important considerations. It is also important to recognise the artist's role in healing the trauma of colonialism and charting the way forward for us as a people. Therefore, what is important is the rewarding of their work.

## 4.2 Public Discussion (Comments from Participants):

- Don't lose Trinbagonian culture in the pursuit of disparate cultures that comprise a multicultural society. None can exist without the other. We need both the whole and its parts.
- Multiculturalism must not be used as platform for cultural policy because it is not suited to us and it may constrict our approach.
- We need a focus on the arts and to make sure that it is not lost in our search for multicultural policy.
- Members of the public in attendance were clearly dissatisfied with the concept of multiculturalism and found it an inappropriate concept for Trinidad and Tobago. Some spoke as though it were an imposition.
- Many expressed dismay at the lack of a proper definition for Multiculturalism.
- Some signalled their dissatisfaction with the sharing of state resources in the past and desired a more equitable system of distribution.

## 5.0 Summary of Key Recommendations or Suggestions

- Devise our own Multiculturalism Policy.
- Multiculturalism implies broad appreciation of all types of artforms and heritage.
- Focus on the support of excellence in all types of artforms and genres of art irrespective of whether or not they originate in the country or not.
- Avoid the prescriptive approach used by the major countries and choose a 'bottom up' approach.
- Place a premium on supporting artistic expression.
- The country does have a long history of racial harmony that must be respected and preserved.
- Pay heed to international standard setting instruments like the United Nations International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic Religious and Linguistic Minorities and the UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity.
- Ensure that proper legislative and administrative arrangements are put in place to enforce any policies that are created.
- Commissions of Human Rights or Equal Opportunity are the best way to treat with iniquities posed by political systems that are based on the distribution of resources to those who can best influence the political process.
- Support must be generated for integration and crossover projects and the deliberate promotion of a "douglarization" of culture so as not to trap ourselves in structures that colonialism defined.
- The State must not deliberately manipulate cultural forms but provide platforms for works that are already proceeding apace.
- Support for all views knowledge and values with the appreciation that contestation is inevitable and is not naturally a bad thing.
- Honour and recognise the work of those artists and communities who have contributed to our national and artistic development.