

W I N S

Voices of Inclusion

Thirteenth Issue: April 2025



Editor: Dr. Hitu Sood

(She/Her)

Send us your views, ideas and comments for the next issue at wins@hituhrsolutions.com

Beyond DEI: How Diversity of Thought Can Shape the Future of Canada

By Richard Pinnock, President Diversity of Thought Institute

The concept of promoting fair representation in Canadian workplaces has evolved significantly since the enactment of the Employment Equity Act of 1986. Today, the backlash against Diversity Equity & Inclusion (DEI) in the U.S. is negatively influencing DEI strategy decisions across many Canadian organizations. However, rather than signaling the demise of workplace DEI efforts, these times present organizations with an opportunity to refine and refocus existing initiatives toward

diversity of thought—a more sustainable, innovation-driven approach to leadership and workforce development across Canada.

Evolution of DEI in Canada

Introduced by Justice Rosalie Abella [in 1986] to address systemic employment barriers for Women, Indigenous Peoples, Persons with Disabilities, and Visible Minorities, the initial focus was gender diversity, specifically on women's representation in senior leadership roles. Over time, Employment Equity's focus on Diversity (representation) expanded to include inclusion (belonging); and equity (fairness), hence DEI. More recently, accessibility considerations have led to the current acronym IDE&A (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity & Accessibility).

In 1986, women in Canada held 21% of senior management roles; by 2024, this figure grew to 30%, with women of color representing 6% of these positions. With 50% of the population being women and 25% being Visible Minority women, leadership representation still has a way to go before reflecting Canada's growing diversity. This is even more pronounced when considering Persons with Disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, [and other equity-deserving groups] further highlighting the need for a strategic shift in approach.



...these times present organizations with an opportunity to refine and refocus existing initiatives toward diversity of thought—a more sustainable, innovation-driven approach to leadership and workforce development across Canada.



Original Rationale Behind DEI in Canada

The rationale behind DEI was initially rooted in the concept of leveraging diversity of thought. By breaking down barriers for underrepresented groups, organizations could then leverage diverse perspectives to drive employee engagement, foster innovation, and improve customer service. The original intent was to create workplace environments where different ways of thinking would lead to better decision-making and enhanced organizational outcomes.

DEI Weaponization Spillover from the United States into Canada

While DEI has positively influenced workforce dynamics worldwide, it has recently become increasingly politicized, particularly in the USA. This negative DEI spill-over into Canada underscores the need for Canadian organizations to establish a more sustainable framework rooted in supporting organizational success, rather than political ideology.

In 1986, Canada adopted Employment Equity as a less aggressive alternative to the Affirmative Action approach implemented in the USA. In 1961, John F. Kennedy introduced the first action designed to promote fair employment opportunities. President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, banning segregation and employment discrimination, and then the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which removed barriers that disenfranchised Black voters. Johnson allegedly made a controversial remark while signing the bill that related to how this new legislation would lock in Black votes for the Democratic Party for the next 100 years.

The Rainbow Coalition strategy was first introduced by Black Panther Fred Hampton who was killed by Chicago police in a raid on his house on December 4, 1969. This coalition strategy was aimed at uniting marginalized communities for social justice reform. Reverend Jesse Jackson revived the concept in his 1984 Presidential bid, advocating for a multi-ethnic political alliance. Then, Barack Obama successfully expanded on this same approach in his 2008 and 2012 Presidential campaigns, emphasizing hope, unity, social justice, and inclusion.

Although the coalition strategy approach initially sought to promote equity and justice, coalition politics has left modern-day political leaders struggling to balance conflicting priorities among divergent constituent groups. This has led to deep political polarization in the USA, where weaponized terms like "woke", "diversity hire", "racist", and "fascist" have put DEI programs and the associated societal gains at great risk.

The Impact of Canada's Changing Diversity

The effects of Canada's economic-class immigration policies have significantly outpaced USA immigration, helping to bolster Canada's labour markets.

From 1986 to 2024:

- USA Immigration: 36 million new immigrants, 75% visible minorities or 28.8 million
- Canada's Immigration: 11 million new immigrants, 70% visible minorities or 7.7 million
- Visible Minority Population Growth in Canada: 4.7% in 1981 to 26.5% in 2021
- By 2051, the majority of Canadians are projected to identify as members of a racialized group

1981 4.7% OF CANADA'S POPULATION IDENTIFIED AS A VISIBLE MINORITY

2021 26.5% OF CANADA'S POPULATION IDENTIFIED AS A VISIBLE MINORITY

2051 THE MAJORITY OF CANADIANS ARE PROJECTED TO IDENTIFY AS MEMBERS OF A RACIALIZED GROUP

Why Diversity of Thought Matters in Canada

As Canadian organizations pause to reassess their commitments to DEI, immigration will continue to dynamically reshape Canada's workforce and marketplace, increasing cultural diversity and driving economic opportunity.

Since 1986, DEI has improved diversity representation across Canadian organizations, however,

...having a more diverse workforce does not automatically result in elevated cognitive diversity. Organizations must ensure that all employees contributing diverse perspectives is actively encouraged, heard, and integrated into all business decisions.

Without this intentional effort, diversity becomes superficial, failing to enhance engagement, innovation, or long-term productivity.

In Canada, we need to move highly-skilled, under-employed immigrants away from driving Ubers to driving the Canadian economy! Canadian organizations that fail to get on board with this shift in thinking will struggle to remain competitive, or even viable.

How Canada's Leaders Can Shift Focus Towards Diversity of Thought

The next-level opportunity for leaders in Canada lies in embracing "diversity of thought".

After forty years of ad hoc DEI investments, now is the time to capitalize on the collective gains in representation within the Canadian labour market. Organizations must now move beyond compliance-driven DEI efforts, to proactively cultivate work environments where diversity of thought thrives in order to benefit from distinct and sustained competitive advantages. This shift must recognize that: 1) diversity goes far beyond the employment equity designated groups, and; 2) that every employee has a unique inter-sectional lived-experience that can contribute to collective diversity of thought.

How can you ensure that your mission statement and organizational values are aligned with the diversity of thought approach. Here are a few key strategies to consider:

1. Reaffirming Mission and Core Values: Realign employees with organizational mission and foundational values to become less impacted by disruptive politically-driven trends.
2. Supporting Diversity of Thought in Leadership: Invest in leadership development training that prioritizes innovative, data-driven decision-making and measurable outcomes.
3. Promoting a Safe and Trusting Organizational Climate: Encourage open discussion and shared accountability for all employees to create long-term strategic advantage.
4. Fostering Team Collaboration: Embrace diversity in culture, education, professional background and lived experience to drive innovation, problem-solving and results.

Is DEI Ending in Canadian Workplaces?

Canadian organizations that integrate diversity of thought into all decision-making will be better positioned to embrace inevitable demographic changes and become better positioned to pursue new opportunities across global markets. Diversity of thought will help attract, advance and retain top talent, while driving excellence through innovation. The success of Canada's economy will depend on how quickly organizations can move beyond a base-level focus on diversity representation to truly embrace the power of different perspectives and thinking.

Now is the time for Canadian leaders to capitalize on forty years of investment into DEI. Canada must once again embrace diversity of thought; the next-level principle that has stood the test of time.

**This article was written using ChatGPT to refine content and enhance research integration.*



About the Author

Richard Pinnock is the President of Diversity of Thought Institute, an organization that provides DEI practitioners with opportunities to collaborate in creating next generation solutions for clients interested in leveraging 'diversity of thought'. He recently retired from Export Development Canada (EDC) as Director, Chief Diversity Officer. His professional experience spans Public, Private, Education, Professional Services, and Not-for-Profit sectors. Contact: rpinnock@DOTinstitute.ca



To help WINS continue this work please donate and/ partner with the organization at www.winscanada.com/donate

For more information, email admin@winscanada.com or visit www.winscanada.com

