

Public Institutions Out of Step With Canadians on Race-Based Hiring

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A file photo of students on a university campus. Spiroview Inc/Shutterstock



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Commentary

New data reveals that most Canadians want employers to take a colourblind approach in the hiring process instead of taking race or ethnic background into account.

A [survey conducted by Leger](#) for the Association for Canadian Studies asked respondents to say whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “When companies hire people, it is important for employers to take their cultural background (e.g., racial status/visible minority) into account.” A majority of 57 percent disagreed, while 27 percent agreed, and another 15 percent didn’t know.

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Gender played virtually no role in the results, with 57 percent of both men and women saying they disagreed with race-based hiring. There was some variation between the regions, with Quebecers registering the highest level of disagreement at 63 percent, and people in Atlantic Canada registering the highest level of agreement at 36 percent.

Strikingly, opposition to race-based hiring cut right across racial lines, with a majority of white respondents (59 percent) disagreeing, but also a sizable plurality of non-white respondents (49 percent) feeling the same way. Similarly, large proportions of both native-born Canadians (59 percent) and foreign-born Canadians (50 percent) disagreed with employers considering race in the hiring process.

Unlike most surveys by Canadian polling firms, this one included an American sample as well as a Canadian one. This yielded the interesting finding that Canadians are far likelier than Americans to oppose taking race into account in hiring. Whereas 57 percent of Canadian respondents felt that way, only 46 percent of American respondents did.

Despite the lack of buy-in from Canadians demonstrated by this latest polling data, key institutions such as universities regularly incorporate race and ethnic background into hiring choices.

In October 2022, one university launched an [“Inclusive Excellence Cluster Hiring Initiative”](#) to “recruit 45 professors from equity-deserving groups.” The university’s Office of Equity, Diversity and

Inclusion defines “equity-deserving groups” as “women, Indigenous peoples, visible/racialized minority persons, and persons with disabilities, as well as LGBTQ2S+ persons.”

Some of the race-based hiring practices in public institutions are driven by federal government policy. The prestigious Canada Research Chairs program mandates that participating universities [tailor their nominations](#) to meet “institutional equity targets” for “racialized individuals, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, women and gender equity-seeking groups.”

These targets have real-life implications for academics. To meet the federal government’s criteria, universities routinely advertise research chair positions which are explicitly restricted to so-called equity groups, such as one university’s advertisement for a computer science tenured faculty stating that the position is “open only to qualified individuals who self-identify as a member of a racialized minority.”

Programs like this extend beyond academia into Canada’s bureaucracy. In January 2021, a [Privy Council document](#) titled “Call to Action on Anti-Racism, Equity, and Inclusion in the Federal Public Service” argued that the public service “must be more diverse” and called for increased recruitment from “Indigenous communities and Black and other racialized communities from across all regions of Canada.”

Since 2021, this call to action has become a concrete reality in government departments. A September 2023 [document from the Department of Finance](#) explains that the department’s hiring and departure rate data have contributed to a “lack of progress in closing gaps in representation.” The department proposes minimum hiring rates for different equity groups to boost representation, including 62 percent for women, 43 percent for visible minorities, and 6 percent for indigenous Canadians.

Legally, the federal government is free to implement affirmative action programs. Section 15(2) of the [Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#) explains that the Charter’s equality provision does not prohibit “any

law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.”

The government can use this Charter section as a defence if a legal challenge is raised against a government affirmative action program.

This has been [tested in R. v. Kapp](#), where the Supreme Court of Canada heard arguments from non-aboriginal fishermen against the constitutionality of a government program granting aboriginal fishermen an exclusive fishing licence. While the non-aboriginal fishermen successfully proved they were being discriminated against, the court ruled that this program was geared towards helping a disadvantaged group and was thus protected by Section 15(2).

There is an important point of distinction here. While Section 15(2) shields government affirmative action programs from legal challenges, it does not mandate their adoption. If it wished, a future government could align public opinion with public policy by restricting or even eliminating race-based hiring in Canada’s institutions. The latest opinion data shows that a large majority, composed of Canadians from all ethnic backgrounds, would most likely be sympathetic to such a move.

For now, race-based hiring remains entrenched in public institutions, while most citizens continue to prefer a colourblind meritocracy.

Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

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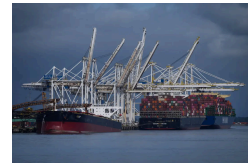
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