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Vancouver: The world's most liveable city combines multiculturalism with environmental sustainability

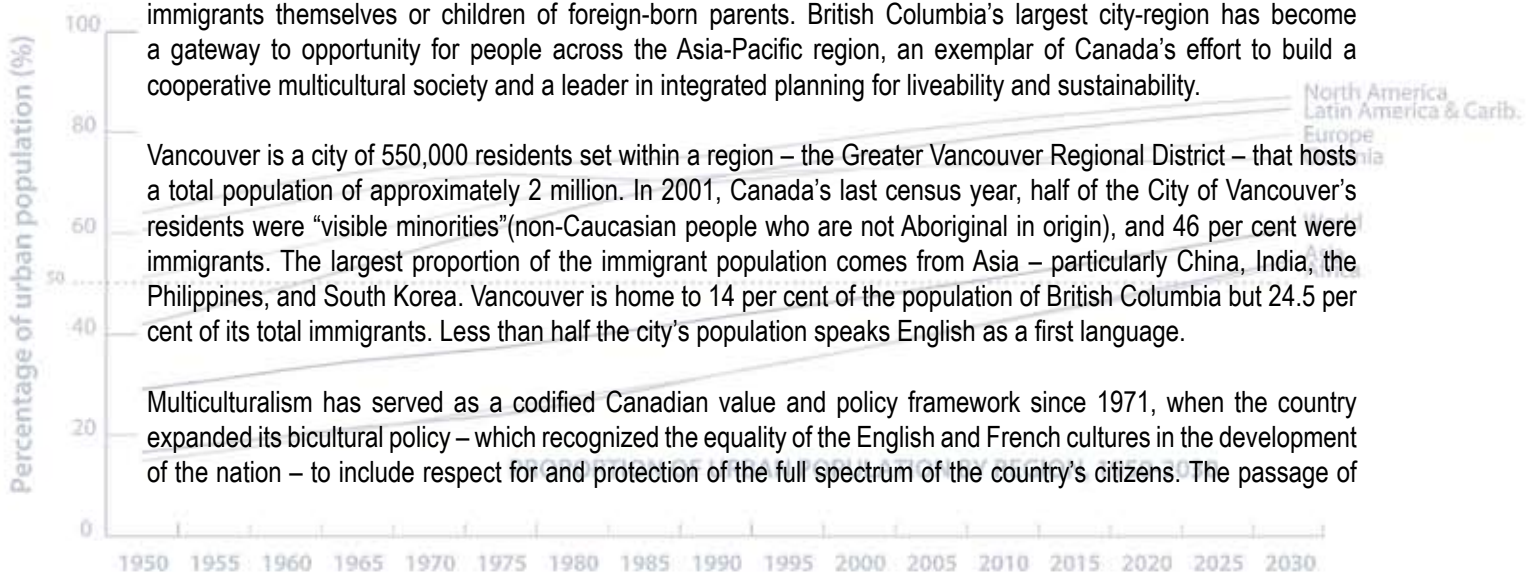
"Vancouver is home to a multitude of cultures and languages from around the world. The City of Vancouver values this diversity, and considers it a source of our strength, vitality and prosperity." — City of Vancouver 2005

In October 2005, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) voted Vancouver, British Columbia, the world's most liveable city. Vancouver topped the EIU's list of 127 cities around the world, having earned the honour for its well-established infrastructure, cultural and environmental richness, low crime rate, and easy access to goods and services. While many point to Vancouver for its environmental consciousness and physical beauty, it is, in effect, the city's cultural diversity and resources that work most effectively toward strengthening its environmental sustainability and liveability.

Vancouver's population is a mosaic of cultures and ethnicities: 38 per cent of the metropolitan region's total population is foreign born, and two-thirds of the adult population is directly connected to immigration, being immigrants themselves or children of foreign-born parents. British Columbia's largest city-region has become a gateway to opportunity for people across the Asia-Pacific region, an exemplar of Canada's effort to build a cooperative multicultural society and a leader in integrated planning for liveability and sustainability.

Vancouver is a city of 550,000 residents set within a region – the Greater Vancouver Regional District – that hosts a total population of approximately 2 million. In 2001, Canada's last census year, half of the City of Vancouver's residents were "visible minorities" (non-Caucasian people who are not Aboriginal in origin), and 46 per cent were immigrants. The largest proportion of the immigrant population comes from Asia – particularly China, India, the Philippines, and South Korea. Vancouver is home to 14 per cent of the population of British Columbia but 24.5 per cent of its total immigrants. Less than half the city's population speaks English as a first language.

Multiculturalism has served as a codified Canadian value and policy framework since 1971, when the country expanded its bicultural policy – which recognized the equality of the English and French cultures in the development of the nation – to include respect for and protection of the full spectrum of the country's citizens. The passage of



the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988 further provided a comprehensive legislative structure for the country's emerging multicultural identity. As one of Canada's most diverse urban centres, the City of Vancouver has initiated many strategies and partnerships designed to promote social inclusion, increase civic engagement, recognize the many cultural and linguistic groups in and around Vancouver, and address the needs of Vancouver residents from a range of backgrounds.

One of the major building blocks upon which multicultural programmes and services are built is the Civic Policy on Multicultural Relations. Adopted in 1988 as a municipal extension of the national legislation, the policy recognizes ethnic, cultural and racial diversity as a source of strength for the city and resolves that all residents have the right to freedom from prejudice as well as the right to access civic services regardless of background or language. A variety of institutional supports within the city exist to help implement the policy. These include a Social Planning Department that participates in the overall planning of the city by reviewing city developments and providing advice on how to address specific cultural and social needs.

The Social Planning Department was instrumental in helping diverse cultural communities and demographic groups participate in Vancouver's component of the Greater Vancouver regional planning process. The six-year participatory process resulted in an award-winning Liveable Region Strategic Plan, Greater Vancouver's official regional growth strategy, adopted in 1996. The City of Vancouver carried out its part of the regional process between 1992 and 1995, when approximately 20,000 residents participated in the CityPlan initiative. As in the overall regional vision, the city's residents expressed a strong commitment to connecting social and environmental principles for achieving sustainability. They requested more efficient public transport, more and safer bicycle routes through the city and more pedestrian-friendly streets. Residents also prioritized the following: development of distinctive neighbourhoods featuring diverse public spaces, affordable housing and access to services; a strong sense of community and increased public safety; and economic development that keeps jobs in the city. The city is also investing millions of dollars to reduce homelessness and drug addiction within the Aboriginal population, which for many years was left out of Canada's development agenda.

Sources: Mendes & Holden 2005; Leaf 2005; UN-HABITAT 2002a; City of Vancouver 2001; City of Vancouver 2004; Statistics Canada 2001; Economist Intelligence Unit 2005.

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