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## **John Stuart Mill and the Liberal Idea of Canada**

The writer and politician John Stuart Mill played an important role in the two greatest constitutional moments of 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada: he publicly supported Lord Durham's 1838 report on Canada and he voted for the British North American Act (1867) that formed the Dominion of Canada. Mill had a part, in his own mind an important part, in Canada's evolution from colony to self-governing Dominion. I argue that his attitude to Canada was broadly consistent across these three decades and was consistent with his principled defence of liberal imperialism. But it was complicated by Mill's relatively low opinion of the French Canadians who, he thought, lagged behind the rest of Canada in their development. That is why Mill supported Durham's recommendation that they be assimilated into the English-speaking mainstream. I conclude that French Canada exposed the limits of Mill's form of liberalism, which gave priority to the 'civilising' imperative over cultural diversity. And it remains questionable just how capacious Millian liberalism really is in accommodating cultural diversity.

**Keywords:** Mill, Canada, liberalism, imperialism, multiculturalism, Quebec

L'écrivain et homme politique John Stuart Mill a joué un rôle important dans les deux plus grands moments constitutionnels du Canada au XIXe siècle: il a publiquement appuyé le rapport de 1838 de Lord Durham sur le Canada et il a voté pour l'Acte de l'Amérique du Nord britannique (1867) qui a formé le Dominion du Canada. Mill a joué un rôle, à son avis un rôle important, dans l'évolution du Canada de colonie à un dominion autonome. Je soutiens que son attitude à l'égard du Canada était globalement la même au cours de ces trois décennies et était conforme à sa défense de principe de l'impérialisme libéral. Mais cela a été compliqué par l'opinion relativement faible de Mill sur les Canadiens français qui, pensait-il, étaient à la traîne du reste du Canada dans leur développement. C'est la raison pour laquelle Mill a appuyé la recommandation de Durham d'être assimilés au grand public anglophone. Je conclus que le Canada français a exposé les limites de la forme de libéralisme de Mill, qui donnait la priorité à l'impératif «civilisateur» sur la diversité culturelle. Et on peut se demander à quel point le libéralisme millien est vraiment vaste pour accueillir la diversité culturelle.

**Mots clés:** Mill, Canada, libéralisme, impérialisme, multiculturalisme, Québec

## **Introduction**

The writer, politician, and leading public intellectual John Stuart Mill played an important, if little known, role in the two greatest constitutional moments of 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada. He was a friend and supporter of Lord Durham, whose famous 1838 report on Canada he enthusiastically endorsed.<sup>1</sup> Mill claimed credit for rescuing Durham's reputation at the time, and thereby his bold new policy for imperial devolution. And during his brief tenure as a

member of the UK Parliament (1865 – 1868), Mill voted for the British North American Act that united the colonies of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick into the Dominion of Canada in 1867 (Reeves 2007: 144). He did so willingly, rather than at the insistence of his party, which was then in opposition, viewing the plan as ‘a very good one’ for the country (CW 15: 965). He was, in this very limited sense, a legislative founder of Canada, a Father of Confederation, if you will. Mill had a part, in his own mind a key part, in Canada’s 19<sup>th</sup> century evolution from colony to self-governing Dominion within the British Empire.

In this paper, I argue, first, that Mill’s attitude towards Canada was broadly consistent across the three decades between 1837 and 1867. It was also consistent with his principled (as he saw it) defence of liberal imperialism. This was based on a fundamental distinction he drew between what he called ‘civilised’ and ‘barbaric’ or ‘savage’ societies. According to Mill, political rights should be apportioned on the basis of a society’s progress towards liberal values and practices that give paramountcy to individual freedom and the cultivation of the moral and intellectual faculties. By this standard, he regarded the settler colonies of Britain’s Empire such as Canada as meriting self-government, unlike its colonies in India and Africa, for which an enlightened despotism was more appropriate, at least for the time being. However, Mill favoured the preservation of the British Empire, unlike many other liberals at the time, since he viewed it as, on balance, a force for progress and therefore compatible with self-government.

I further argue that this position was complicated by Mill’s relatively low opinion of the French Canadians. Although he considered them to be a ‘civilised’ people deserving of freedom and self-government, they lagged behind the English because their national character

is less well-suited to free representative institutions, the most appropriate and advanced form of government for 'civilised' societies. Mill blamed this on the traditional culture of French society, which has impeded its progress, and the power of the Catholic Church. That is why he was a keen supporter of Durham's controversial recommendation that they be gradually assimilated into the English-speaking mainstream of North America, for their own good.

Nineteenth century French Canada exposed the limits of Mill's form of liberal imperialism that remained a feature of Canadian politics long after his death.

I conclude that Mill ultimately saw the matter as a choice between progress and difference, in which he favoured the former. He gave priority to the 'civilising' imperative over social and cultural diversity. Liberalism in Canada today rejects the necessity to choose; it claims to be multicultural, both in theory and in practice. But it remains questionable just how capacious liberalism really is in accommodating significant cultural diversity. While English-speaking and French-speaking Canada are much more alike than they were in Mill's time, and both are more like the United States than they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Canada is significantly more culturally and ethnically diverse than it was 150 years ago, something that presents new challenges to liberal tolerance. Although Mill's defence of assimilation and imperialism has today lost the appeal it had to many mid-19<sup>th</sup> century liberals, its open acknowledgement of the limits that liberalism places on cultural diversity may yet prove to be more honest than the recent case for a 'liberal multiculturalism'.

### **Saving Lord Durham**

In the wake of the rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada that erupted in 1837, the British government appointed the Whig peer James Lambton, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Durham, Governor General

of Canada with a mission to investigate the causes of the uprisings and make recommendations for the future governance of Britain's North American colonies. In his landmark *Report on the Affairs of British North America* (1838) Durham proposed a legislative union of the Canadas into a single colony and the granting of responsible government, something that had never before existed in the British Empire. The UK government adopted the first proposal but postponed the second. The new Governor General also released 160 rebel prisoners, which caused outrage and led to his early recall to Britain amid great controversy.

Mill declared at the time that Durham's policy for British North America as set out in his *Report* 'was almost exactly what mine would have been' (CW 1: 222). More than that, he boasted in a letter that 'I saved Lord Durham' by publicly defending his controversial prisoner release (CW 13: 426). By personally 'upholding the reputation of Lord Durham' and his policies in this way, Mill believed that he had 'contributed materially' to the beginning of what he called a 'new era' in imperial governance which was soon enacted for Britain's North American colonies and eventually in all of the Dominions of the Empire (CW 1: 224).

Mill strongly supported the Canadian rebellions of 1837 on the same grounds that the Thirteen Colonies had rebelled half a century before. He charged the British government with violating a 'sacred' constitutional principle: taxing subjects without their consent. This was a *casus belli* between the people and their government, making the colonists soldiers in a war fighting to restore their stolen rights rather than rebels as such (CW 6: 417). These events provoked a crisis in imperial governance not just in Canada but across the British Empire. Many colonists demanded greater control over their own affairs, a stance for which

Durham and Mill had complete sympathy. One of the Report's central recommendations was responsible government for Britain's Canadian colonies to allow them internal self-control and a very limited form of democracy within the Empire. This required both Westminster above and local oligarchies below to relinquish some of their power to elected legislative assemblies, a radical idea at the time intended to usher in 'a new era in the colonial policy of nations', in Mill's words, that was unique in British history up to that point (*CW* 19: 563).

This recommendation was not immediately accepted in London. It wasn't until the election of a new government there in 1847 seeking to cut colonial expenditures that Britain granted local self-government to its settler colonies, starting in North America. This occurred the following year when responsible government was established in Nova Scotia and the Canadas, and soon afterwards in the other Maritime colonies and beyond to Australia and New Zealand.

Although Mill was on the side of the Canadian rebels, he remained a consistent imperialist. He favoured reforming the British Empire along the lines proposed by Durham rather than dissolving it, and later approved of the confederation plan for British North America partly because it preserved the link with the United Kingdom and its progressive empire, as he saw it. With the eventual granting of responsible government in Canada in the 1840s, Mill was satisfied that the colonists would be better off inside the British Empire than outside of it. Writing about this to the economist John Elliot Cairnes in 1864, he remarked that 'I am more unwilling to sever the tie than you seem to be, and I do not at all agree with Goldwin Smith in thinking the severance actually desirable' (*CW* 15: 965). Smith was a prominent and influential classical liberal who had settled in Canada in the 1870s. While he shared Mill's

liberal values and belief that the English-speaking nations were the vanguard of human progress, he was a devoted anti-imperialist who considered Canada a 'lost cause' (Smith 1877: 20) and a union of Canada and the United States outside the British Empire as 'almost as certain as the rising of tomorrow's sun' (Phillips 2002: 114). Not all classical liberals in nineteenth century were imperialists like Mill.

While Mill supported the continuation of a reformed and reforming British Empire, which he considered an important step 'towards universal peace, and general friendly co-operation between nations', he opposed plans for an Imperial federation which were increasingly popular in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century (CW 19: 565). This involved the creation of an intercontinental federal state among the colonies of the British Empire with its capital in London. Many of the proponents of this idea were Canadians, foremost of whom were George Monro Grant and Sir George Robert Parkin. Mill's objections to this plan were both practical and principled. He believed that an equal federation of far-flung colonies sharing a single imperial Parliament with Britain is 'inconsistent with the rational principles of government' given the vast distances between them. 'Countries separated by half a globe', he wrote in *Considerations on Government* (1861), 'do not present the natural conditions for being under one government' (CW 19: 564). Instead, Mill defended a multi-tier empire combining advanced, self-governing dominions freely associated with each other and colonies ruled paternalistically from London in the best interests of their subjects. He believed that this complex structure was the most appropriate for a large, diverse, geographically dispersed global empire and the most likely to promote the benefits that come with it, as he saw them. The dominions should only be bound together within the Empire by a 'slight bond of connexion' and as long as they choose to remain (CW 19: 565). Although Mill harshly criticised cases of imperial abuse and exploitation, he trusted in the general



benevolence and goodwill of Britain as an imperial power since it is ‘incomparably the most conscientious of all nations’ (CW 21: 115).

### **An Empire of Liberalism**

Mill did not support imperialism in all of its forms. He believed that only a benevolent, liberal, improving empire of the contemporary British kind is justified. He considered humans as progressive beings whose advance from savagery to civilisation was the only true path to human happiness. ‘The most important quality of the human intellect’, he claimed, ‘is its progressiveness, its tendency to improvement’ (CW 26: 349). This idea is expressed in the epigram to Mill’s essay *On Liberty* (1859), taken from Wilhelm von Humboldt, who claimed that the leading principle of his work is ‘the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity’ (CW 18: 15). And as a utilitarian, the promotion of happiness was for Mill ‘the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions’ (CW 18: 224). A truly happy society is necessarily a civilised society, in which our mental and moral faculties are developed to their fullest possible extent. ‘[T]he end of man’, he writes in *On Liberty*, ‘is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole’ (CW 18: 261). And a civilised society is necessarily a free society because the development of our higher faculties is only possible where we are left alone to pursue ‘our own good in our own way’ (CW 18: 226).

However, most societies are still not civilised enough to rule themselves, Mill believed. Indeed, the degree of development ‘ranges downwards to a condition very little above the highest of the beasts’ in some cases (CW 19: 394). His belief in progressive stages of civilisational development was strongly influenced by his father James Mill, whose *The*

*History of British India* (1817) had relied on a long-standing debate among earlier Scottish writers such as Adam Smith, William Robertson, John Millar and Adam Ferguson about the phased emergence of advanced, modern societies out of simpler and more 'savage' forms of social organisation (Capaldi 2004: 137 – 39). Beate Jahn distinguishes four separate stages in John Stuart Mill's conception of development, which she labels savagism, slavery, barbarism and civilisation (Jahn 2005: 603).

Mill was clearest about the extremes. People who are at the very bottom of his scale are 'savages' without commerce, manufacturing, agriculture, law, justice and private property. They lack both the material and the moral conditions for self-governance, so the most appropriate form of government for them is despotism. For those at the very top of the scale, who are in the 'maturity of their faculties', he favoured a policy of *laissez-faire*, leaving them alone as societies to govern themselves and as individuals to find the form of life that suits each person in their own unique way. The ideal form of government for civilised societies is representative democracy.

What Mill may have meant by the intermediate stages between savagism and civilisation is much less clear. Jahn admits that he does not 'spell out clearly' the stage she calls 'barbarism', which she infers from his writings. He often uses 'savage' and 'savagery' as if they were interchangeable with 'barbarian' and 'barbarism', thereby blurring the interim stages, and he sometimes refers to 'semi-barbarous' and semi-civilised' peoples, implying a range within each stage. In *On Liberty*, Mill writes that 'despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians' (CW 18: 224), suggesting that all non-civilised peoples (savage, barbaric and slave) should be subject to despotic rule, which makes it even

more difficult to distinguish them. And he claimed that civilised societies can regress to earlier stages, as in the case of China, further complicating his theory with movement in different directions. Indeed, one of his greatest fears in *On Liberty* is that modern European civilisation is at serious risk of following the same degenerate path as China. For Mill, attaining civilisation is no guarantee that a society won't become barbarous or savage in the future.

By 'despotism' Mill meant coercive force and paternalistic control of subject populations by enlightened and more advanced rulers. He was severely critical of cases within the British Empire where despotic rule was unenlightened and therefore either did not promote progress or actually impeded it. This was the case in Ireland, whose advance was blocked by centuries of oppressive English rule and a grossly iniquitous system of land tenure. Even so, he argued against both independence and home rule for Ireland, believing that its best hope for progress was within a reformed and benevolent, if imperfect, empire.

Applying this somewhat unclear conception of stages of development to the societies of his time, Mill concluded that only the nations of Europe and its white settler colonies were as yet sufficiently civilised to warrant self-government and full political rights and freedoms. By contrast, 'backward states of society' should continue to be ruled by an enlightened despotism until they have attained a 'higher stage of improvement' (CW 19: 567). Writing of Britain's colonies in his essay *On Representative Government*, Mill asserts that 'some are composed of people of similar civilization to the ruling country; capable of, and ripe for, representative government: such as the British possessions in America and Australia. Others, like India, are still at a great distance from that state' (CW 19: 562). Before he quit the East

India Company in 1858, Mill argued against proposals by the British government to grant some very limited self-government to India on the grounds that it was not yet ready for it, whereas he had earlier endorsed responsible government for Britain's North American colonies (Mehta 1999).

Probably the most controversial recommendation in Durham's Report was the union of the British colonies of North America in order to assimilate French Canada to English language and culture, the sooner the better. He portrays the French Canadians as an 'uneducated and unprogressive people' whose adherence to their 'ancient prejudices, ancient customs, and ancient laws' has impeded their advancement on the scale of civilisation, unlike the English, who have led the way because they are energetic, enterprising and ambitious. Durham expressed regret that the British had allowed the French Canadians to retain so much of their traditional culture in the wake of the Conquest of 1759. Institutions such as the French language, the Catholic Church and the civil law were protected in the Proclamation Act (1763), the Quebec Act (1774), and the Constitutional Act (1791), to the ultimate detriment of the Canadians, he thought. They would have been far better off if the British had followed the same course that the Americans would take towards the former French colony of Louisiana, which had been given no such protections after it was purchased by the United States in 1803; it was eventually absorbed into the dominant, English-speaking culture of the US, thereby avoiding the backwardness of French Canada. Durham's desire, he claimed, is 'to elevate them [the French Canadians] from that inferiority' they are currently in and 'give to the [French] Canadians our English character' (Durham 1839: 94). According to his Report, the 'first object' of British policy in Lower Canada now 'ought to be that of making it an English province' (Durham 1839: 95). Uniting the British colonies of North America and encouraging immigration from Britain would advance that goal, which would serve the long-

term interests of the French as well as the English, Durham believed. It is clear from his assimilationist recommendations that Durham saw no inherent biological or racial limits on the French capability for advancement. He blamed their culture and institutions for giving them a character that impedes the progress of civilisation by stunting intellectual and moral development. The result, he declared, is ‘an old and stationary society in a new and progressive world’ (Durham 1839: 9).

Mill shared this view that the failure of the French to keep pace with the English was circumstantial rather than biologically inherent. The rise of biological theories of race in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had little apparent impact on his view of empire, at least consciously. Unlike many imperialists at the time, Mill believed that all races were in principle and in practice capable of development to the level of ‘civilisation’ and therefore self-government. Group differences for him are matters of nurture rather than nature, or what the Victorians called ‘character’ (Collini 1985). In the right environment, any society is capable of progress to the same level as Britain, which he took to be the most advanced civilisation in history to that point, a view common among British liberals at the time. It is ‘national character’ that ‘causes one nation to succeed in what it attempts, another to fail; one nation to understand and aspire to elevated things, another to grovel in mean ones’ (CW 10: 99). That is why Mill called in his *System of Logic* (1843) for a ‘science of national character’ rather than of race, which is a fixed biological category (CW 8: 904). He argued in his *Considerations on Representative Government* that assimilating the French Canadians to English culture would ‘merge their nationality of race in a nationality of country’ (CW 6: 458 – 9). It has even been persuasively argued that Mill was ‘in the forefront of attempts to discredit the deterministic implications of racial theories and assert the ascendancy of “mind over matter”’ (Varouxakis 1998: 376).

While the French and the English are both ‘civilised’ peoples, according to Mill, they have different national characters that are not equally progressive. In *On Representative Government*, he describes the French as ‘essentially a Southern people’ whose traditional political and religious institutions have made ‘submission and endurance the common character of the people’ (CW 19: 408). While Mill was a fervent supporter of religious toleration and the freedom to practice one’s faith, he had little time for organised religion. Although he never visited North America (just as he never visited India, despite working for the British East India Company in London for 35 years), his enthusiastic endorsement of Durham’s Report implies his general acceptance of the Governor’s negative assessment of French Canada and his agreement with its policy of assimilation. Mill admired the ‘striving, go-ahead character of England and the United States’ which he believed was ‘the foundation of the best hopes for the general improvement of mankind’ (CW 19: 409).

Mill’s view of the French Canadians was influenced by his friend and fellow liberal Alexis de Tocqueville, whose two-volume book *Democracy in America* he reviewed twice (in 1835 and 1840). Tocqueville had visited French Canada and contrasted it unfavourably with the optimistic and energetic spirit of the Americans next door. Mill, summarising Tocqueville’s findings in his review, concludes that the French Canadians have none of the Americans’ ‘ruthless, impatient eagerness for improvement in circumstances’ (CW 18: 192). Like Durham, he welcomed the union of Upper and Lower Canada after the rebellions of 1837 as the ‘only legitimate means of destroying the so-much-talked-of nationality of the French Canadians’ and turn them into ‘British Americans’, thereby propelling them up the scale of progress (CW 6: 458 – 9).

Many years later, in 1861, Mill expressed this policy in general terms, writing that 'it is possible for one nationality to merge and be absorbed in another; and when it was originally an inferior and more backward portion of the human race, the absorption is greatly to its advantage'. He doubts that anyone could seriously object that it would be beneficial for Bretons and Basques to be 'brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly civilised and cultivated people' by being part of the French state. The same applies to the Welsh and the Highland Scots 'as members of the British nation' (CW 19: 549) and the French in Canada. The goal of such assimilation for Mill is not to turn everyone into Englishmen but to advance everyone to the same high level of civilisation that he believed the English had already attained. He was not a nationalist or even a racist, in the narrow biological sense of the term. Mill was an imperialist because he was a universalist and his 'religion', utilitarianism, applied to all humans, as did his idea of civilisation. To Mill the English happen to have made the greatest progress towards this end and therefore they are the most universal people in the world, and their empire the most liberal in history. The case for assimilation is also strengthened by the fact, as he saw it, that multinational states do not make fertile soil for free institutions, which are 'next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities' (CW 19: 547). What is decisive here is whether the majority group or nation in a multinational or multi-ethnic state is more or less superior, in civilisational terms, to the minority. If superior, then gradual assimilation to it is desirable. Mill appears to have believed that this was the case in Canada, which explains his support for the Durham Report. If the majority is inferior, then they should be ruled by the more civilised minority until they have attained the same level of progress. Mill believed that this was the situation in India, which is why he opposed self-government there.

Given Mill's belief that civilised societies can regress to earlier stages of development, it is probable that he feared that French Canada was more susceptible to this possibility than English-speaking Canada based on his perception of their different 'national characters' and the power of the Roman Catholic Church in French Canada. While he was critical of organised religions in general, if not of faith, Mill believed that the Catholic Church is far more hostile to individual freedom than Protestant churches tend to be. When he lived in France at the end of his life he regularly attended the local Protestant church and contributed to it financially (Larsen 2018: 225). He even sat on local committee to promote Protestant elementary schools. The fact that English-speaking Canada was predominantly Protestant and French-speaking Canada Catholic makes it likely that this was among the factors that made Mill more optimistic about the prospects for preserving civilisation in the former than in the latter, and therefore supported his case for assimilation.

### **The Liberal Idea of Canada**

The hope of Durham and Mill was that all human societies would eventually achieve the same level of civilisation, that everyone would ascend to the highest rung on the ladder of progress and, thereby, attain the greatest happiness, the ultimate goal of the utilitarian ethics that was his 'creed'. Mill believed that individual diversity in the form of 'experiments in living' would flourish in civilised society, which is a liberal society by his definition. Both viewed the British Empire as an imperfect but still valuable step 'towards universal peace and general friendly co-operation between nations' that might, one day, consist of fully civilised, self-governing and freely associating states, as he conceived the settler colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand to be already. Until such time, Mill prescribed a complex and



variegated imperial structure that encompassed nations and groups at different stages of development and apportioned different political systems based on them.

A persistent criticism of liberalism since Mill's time is that it seeks to assimilate cultures and nations into a single form of life modelled on modern, Western, secular society. In Canada this concern was expressed immediately in Quebec with the publication of the Durham Report and has been debated consistently ever since. It is still an important theme given Canada's officially multinational state and increasingly multicultural society. Practically, this was expressed in the policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism adopted by the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau in the 1970s and endorsed by all main political parties in Canada. Conceptually, the publication of the seminal book *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* by the Canadian academic Will Kymlicka in 1989 began a comprehensive rethinking of the liberal tradition to accommodate significant cultural diversity.

Kymlicka is a liberal who denies that it entails the assimilation and imperialism Mill and Durham defended. He agrees with Mill that everyone has a basic human interest in autonomy—'being able to rationally assess and revise our current ends'—which he takes to be 'central to Mill's defense of individual rights' (Kymlicka 1992: 41). But he also argues that 'people's capacity to make meaningful choices depends on access to a cultural structure' (Kymlicka 1995: 84), which is normally provided by the diverse nations, cultures and ethnic and religious groups into which we are all born and that provide the immediate context for our individual development. Kymlicka thinks that classical liberal thinkers have tended to understate or overlook this point about the indispensability of culture to freedom and our situatedness in particular contexts, even if Mill himself had a very well-developed

appreciation of the role of culture in the development of individual character. This connection between autonomy and culture is the foundation of Kymlicka's case for liberal multiculturalism.

Since Kymlicka's idea of 'multicultural citizenship' is based on a Millian conception of liberalism that makes individual autonomy the key to human good, he wants to encourage and promote cultural diversity provided the cultures we inhabit support and foster autonomy, meaning they must be liberal in a specific sense. It is multiculturalism *within* liberalism.

While Kymlicka avoids Mill's distinction between culturally superior and culturally inferior peoples, rejects imperialism, and embraces the language of multiculturalism, he still believes that all just and happy societies must be liberal societies in the Millian sense. He has changed the language of liberalism to positively embrace multiculturalism and clearly reject imperialism, and he has made a conceptual case for the indispensability of culture and community for individual agency. But, below the level of language, his liberalism is no more accommodating of cultural practices and forms of life that do not promote individual autonomy than Mill's.

Shefali Misra has argued that Mill is a 'liberal communitarian' who, like Kymlicka, appreciated the attachments that people often have for their particularity and propounded a form of liberalism in which each person is left to seek perfection in his or her own way rather than coercing them despotically to conform to liberal standards of civilisation. 'Mill's perfectionism is not tyrannical, damning those who fail to be, do not wish to be, or seem to others not to be, autonomous', she writes. 'It is flexible, mediated by toleration and value pluralism' (Misra 2012: 282). While granting that there is 'some truth' in the charge that

Mill's liberalism is assimilationist, Misra argues that it also has 'powerful unrecognised affinities with a liberal multiculturalism' (Misra 2012: 273).

As evidence, Misra points to the fact that Mill was harshly critical of particular instances of imperial abuse and believed that, for example, native elites are usually preferable to foreign elites in the administration of the Empire outside Britain (citing the example of India). She also observes that Mill sometimes expressed great sympathy for what he considered 'savage' or 'barbarian' peoples and was open to a range of possibilities for improving them, often at odds with actual British policy. But all this is entirely consistent with his general defence of liberal imperialism and eventual assimilation. Mill never claimed that the British Empire was perfect. Nor does it need to be for him to defend it as a liberal utilitarian. He believed that, overall and on balance, it was a force for good in the world, and said so explicitly and consistently.

The main focus of Misra's discussion of Mill is on what he considered to be advanced, civilised societies. But these were the exception rather than the rule within the British Empire at the time, in his view. The general policy of tolerant *laissez-faire* that he advocates for them did not apply to societies further down his perfectionist scale of civilisational development, where Mill situated most of the Empire. Uncivilised societies, as he saw them, should no more be left to seek their own good in their own way than adults should neglect their children. His entire case for imperialism is based on a paternalistic rejection of a one-size-fits-all policy so long as we are not all at the same stage of development. But Mill nonetheless desired the eventual assimilation of everyone into a single, universal liberal culture with one paramount social role, the autonomous individual.

This particular social role of the free individual ‘in the maturity of his faculties’ engaging in ‘experiments in living’, tolerating the open expression of ideas and publicly debating them to test their veracity, is incompatible with many traditional social roles that seek recognition and support in culturally diverse societies, particularly among religious minorities, which is partly why Mill defended despotism in such places. Misra acknowledges as much when she says that Mill’s liberalism ‘is incompatible with a conservative or communitarian multiculturalism’ (Misra 2012: 277). While a progressive culture of the kind Mill defended in *On Liberty* may produce a rich variety of ideas and practices, it must also discourage those traditional cultures and forms of life that do not give priority to the social role of the autonomous individual as he conceived it. While this may be justifiable, it is not compatible with a multiculturalism that allows a broader range of social roles. And it is difficult to see how a society that tolerates only one social role can really be called ‘multicultural’.

## **Conclusion**

In his Report, Durham eagerly anticipated the establishment of a single liberal, North American Anglosphere, part of which (Canada) would remain inside the Empire and part of it (the US) outside, but it would be culturally and probably linguistically continuous with Britain. This is essentially the same position as Mill, who raised no objection to this, or any other part, of Durham’s Report, which was entirely consistent with his own liberal principles, as I have argued here. He believed that, more or less, Britain, Europe, Canada and the United States were already part of a single expanding civilisation notwithstanding the national boundaries that might contingently separate them. In time, he hoped, they might be joined by all nations in a universal civilisation of free people and autonomous individuals. This is

liberal mono-culturalism, albeit with (limited) individual diversity. While there may be other forms of liberalism that are compatible with multiculturalism (Kukathas 2003), Mill's liberalism is not. Nor is that of Kymlicka. Mill was open and consistent about this to a much greater degree than Kymlicka has been. The question that needs to be asked about Mill now is not whether his liberalism is compatible with multiculturalism (it isn't), but whether his case for liberal mono-culturalism is convincing.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mill claimed that Durham's report was 'written by Charles Buller under the inspiration of Wakefield' (CW 1: 224). Although Durham was assisted by Buller, a friend of Mill's, and by Edward Wakefield, two of his key advisers while he was Governor General of Canada, it is likely that all three played a role in drafting it. I have abbreviated the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* as CW.