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# Being Canadian

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*"No one knows my country, neither the stranger nor its own sons."* — Bruce Hutchison

## Introduction

Defining English-Canadian culture is a perplexing task. Canada is a work in progress: The country retains some of its former traits and customs from its British past, has both absorbed and rejected some of those originating south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, and continuously assimilates a multitude of peoples, customs and mores tied to its generous immigration policies. In short, Canada is creating its own cultural mosaic on an ongoing basis.

## Made in Canada

To the outside world, Canadians and Americans appear very similar. And there are similarities, given the proximity and common history of the two countries. But, we must remember that despite their common history, Canada and the United States diverged at the time of the American Revolution. Canadians (both English and French) were invited to the Continental Congress in 1775 but refused to attend.<sup>1</sup> It was the Empire Loyalists who rejected the notions of individualism and equality of the new American nation and migrated to Canada, bringing with them the desire to continue living under the British Empire. These new migrants, along with the people already in then-British North America, were more accepting of government involvement in their lives and less inclined to accept individual rights as paramount to the rights and well being of the collective. The U.S. Constitution, with its elaborate system of checks and balances, views government as bad, and its powers must be limited so as not to infringe on individual liberties.

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<sup>1</sup> The Continental Congress was the gathering of the lower 13 colonies to map out a strategy against Britain. It also approved the invasion of Canada.

Thus, in the United States, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” was written in the Declaration of Independence.<sup>2</sup> In Canada it was “peace, order and good government” that was written into the British North American Act.<sup>3</sup> “Who is a Canadian? Well, the political answer is that he is an American who avoided Revolution...” according to Canadian scholar Northrop Frye.<sup>4</sup>

Canadian culture, especially in English Canada, is heavily influenced by American culture, a phenomenon from which no nation on earth is immune. As former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once told an American audience: “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant; no matter how friendly and even-tempered the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.” The name “Canada” was prejudiced by the country’s proximity to the U.S.: In the period preceding Confederation, the preferred name of the new country was the “Kingdom of Canada,” but the British feared that this would antagonize the Americans as being too British, so Canada’s official name became the “Dominion of Canada.” American influence also played a role during the formation of one of Canada’s most recognizable symbols: the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) or, less formally, the Mounties. The predecessor to the RCMP was called the Northwest Mounted Police, first deployed into the Northwest Territories following 1867, in part to stop American crimes against the Natives, and in part to bring stability to the region prior to settlement. Due to fear that Americans would view this new force as a threat, it was named “mounted police” rather than cavalry or army, even though it performed a similar function. Furthermore, the colour of the uniform was red, in order to be distinguishable from the blue uniforms of the U.S. cavalry.

The comparison of Canadians vis-a-vis Americans has always occurred and will continue to occur. Although many have maligned this method of defining Canada and Canadians, it is simply not possible to define anything without reference to something else. In the case of Canada the natural comparator is the United States. Here I agree with Seymour Martin Lipset (1990: xiii), a student of both Canada and the United States, who wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Declaration of Independence was signed on 4 July 1776 stating that the 13 British colonies were to dissolve their legal relationships with Britain and become independent states.

<sup>3</sup> British North American Act was a British statute enacted 29 March 1867, providing for the Confederation of British North American colonies into the Dominion of Canada.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Ferguson (2000: 145).

Knowledge of Canada or the United States is the best way to gain insight into the other North American country. Nations can be understood only in comparative perspective. And the more similar the units being compared, the more possible it should be to isolate the factors responsible for differences between them. Looking intensively at Canada and the United States sheds lights on both of them.

Canadians generally do this; Americans generally do not. This can be a source of frustration for many Canadians, as typified by a recent beer commercial known as “The Rant.” It aired repeatedly in the spring of 2000 during the National Hockey League playoffs. The commercial uses a “tongue-in-cheek” approach to tweak Canadian frustration that Americans are largely oblivious to their northern neighbour. It was a huge hit in Canada, spawned a series of similar commercials, and was endlessly parodied by comedians and radio personalities. The commercial has a young Canadian walking on a stage and saying the following:

Hey. I’m not a lumberjack or a fur trader, and I don’t live in an igloo or eat blubber or own a dogsled. And I don’t know Jimmy or Sally or Susie from Canada, although I’m certain they’re really, really nice. I have a prime minister, not a president. I speak English and French, not American. And I pronounce it “about” not “a boot.” I can proudly sew my country’s flag on my backpack. I believe in peacekeeping not policing, diversity not assimilation, and that the beaver is a truly proud and noble animal. A toque is a hat. A chesterfield is a couch, and it’s pronounced “zed,” not “zee,” “zed.” Canada is the second largest landmass, the first nation of hockey and the best part of North America. My name is Joe, and I am Canadian. Thank you.

The popularity of this commercial was due to many factors. First, it made good-natured fun of Americans, often a popular past time in Canada. It showed a calm Canadian becoming passionate about the way Americans view his country. It speaks to the fact that Canada is an advanced and urbanized country, largely eschewing igloos, blubber and dogsleds, that Canada is a large country with 32 million inhabitants, that it has a unique government structure and two distinct languages. Canadians are well regarded in the world (so they can travel with the Canadian flag attached to their backpacks), and the Canadian military is used more often as a “peacekeeping” unit than a unit of aggression. The commercial addresses Canadian multiculturalism, its love of hockey, and the latent patriot-

ism of Canadians. Finally, it ends with a polite “thank you.” The commercial plays on selected stereotypes of Canada, accepting some while rejecting most.

This commercial struck a nerve in the Canadian psyche that no commercial before nor since has managed to do. The irony to some is that this commercial displays Canadian nationalism in much the same jingoistic fashion as the patriotism displayed to the south of the border, and Canadians have tended to be critical of this. This is certainly a considerable distance from the position taken by Pierre Berton (1987: 124): “It embarrasses us, I think, to love our country out loud.”

Increasingly, Canadian expressions of nationalism have become prone to take the raucous form of American-style patriotism according to Millard, et al. (2002) who write that: “[Canadian nationalism] is now better understood as noisy and assertive, even bellicose, and surprisingly analogous to the American manner of patriotic expression with which it is traditionally contrasted (p. 11).” They argue that this new patriotism “may be rooted more in anxiety than any coherent affirmation. Rather than revealing a new confidence in Canadian history, institutions, or shared projects, it is perhaps better understood as a reaction to fundamental challenges to the integrity of the Canadian state (p. 12).” Referring to the Canada Kicks Ass website ([www.canadaka.ca](http://www.canadaka.ca)) they comment on the usual comparisons of Canadians with Americans they say that: “The almost obsessive fixation of Americans seen in this page shows that the new Canadian nationalism has not broken with the major concerns of more traditional nationalism, namely Canada’s relationship with the United States. What has changed, however, is that anti-Americanism is now loudly proclaimed with a smugness and bluster one would associate more with the United States during the Gulf War than supposedly passive and polite Canada (pp. 23-4).”

While this mimicking of the U.S.-style of patriotism is an expression of Canadian nationalism, albeit in an arguably non-Canadian fashion, it is likely only the overt manifestation of a more profound transformation amongst Canadians and expresses a new interest in the country amongst Canadians. The popularity of the recent CBC series *Canada: A People’s History* also attests to this new Canadian nationalism, as does the increased interest in Canadian literature and music. The Canadian Football League has recently seen an increase in attendance and television audiences and Canadian Studies programmes are flourishing throughout the country. All of these show a much keener and more profound

interest in country compared to simple flag waving or the popularity of a series of beer commercials which were designed by clever marketing firms to manipulate its target audience.

## So What is a Canadian?

Canadians, especially those who have spent considerable time in the United States, are acutely aware of the differences between Canadians and Americans, even if they are not always able to articulate these. As Pierre Berton (1987: 124) concludes:

I had thought at the outset that I could distil the essence of my country into a few pithy paragraphs. That has not been possible, as you have perhaps come to realize, for the differences between [Canadians and Americans] are both subtle and complex. That is why Canadians are often tongue-tied when asked to explain, in a sentence or two, how we differ. We know we're not the same but we can't express it succinctly; I doubt if anyone can.

We know that Canadian culture is not American culture, but this definition is not very satisfying. What then is Canadian culture? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, culture is "...the customs, institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or group."

Canadian culture has evolved from the multicultural society which has always been a characteristic of Canada. During the fur trade, economic relationships were forged between the Natives and the French and the English. Often the very survival of the Europeans was dependent on these indigenous people. Following the fall of New France in 1763, it was the British who were forced to get along with a large French population; the future of British North America depended on it, especially following the revolt of the U.S. colonies. The Empire Loyalists joined the mix after escaping oppression in the United States. The Irish and Scots came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fleeing famine and oppression under the British rule. This was followed by the Mennonites, the Doukhobors, the Ukrainians, the Germans, the Dutch, the Polish, the Icelanders, the Americans and others who settled in Western Canada and were in search of better lives. The west was Canada's first true multicultural society. To survive the isolation and the long winters people had to cooperate. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the flows of immigrants continued and the regions from which they came became increasing-

ly varied. As the number of immigrants from war-torn Europe increased following the Second World War, these people worked hard to ensure that the ethnic divisions of Europe were not replicated in Canada. So did other immigrants from strife-ridden countries as diverse as Hungary, Chile, Vietnam, El Salvador, Sudan and Croatia.

Canada was the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy, not because of some radical departure from the past, but rather reflecting the Canada's cultural reality.<sup>5</sup> This happened in 1971 with the Multicultural Act under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. The policy affirmed the equality of all cultural and ethnic groups within a bilingual country.

A defining characteristic of this multicultural reality is broad-mindedness and acceptance. Canada is an extremely tolerant society; it has been forced to be so throughout her history. This does not mean that Canadians always think the same way, this is hardly the case. The debates in Canada can be as fierce as those in any other country, the difference is Canadians will simply agree to disagree. If this is what makes a country boring to some outsiders or they think of Canadians as being nice, but rather dull, decaffeinated Americans, so be it.

This tolerance has recently become manifest in a number of different areas, from gay marriage to the decriminalization of marijuana used for recreation purposes.<sup>6</sup> Same-sex marriage is currently allowed in seven provinces and one territory, and the federal government is planning to introduce legislation that will make same-sex marriage legal throughout the country. Same-sex marriage is the logical extension of gay rights which were given a boost in 1967 when legislation to remove homosexual acts between consenting adults from the Criminal Code. At the time, then-Justice Minister Pierre Trudeau said "There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation." Although Canadians are divided on the issue, with older and more religious Canadians generally more opposed to the measure, the majority of Canadians do not oppose the union of same-sex couples so that they are afforded the same

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<sup>5</sup> Multiculturalism is the policy which supports the equality of all cultural and ethnic groups within a bilingual Canada and promotes funding to ethnic organizations.

<sup>6</sup> For a humorous look at these two issues, see the short film "Escape to Canada" at [www.trailervision.com](http://www.trailervision.com) (accessed December 23, 2004).

rights as their heterosexual counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

The decriminalization of marijuana possession is another public policy issue currently being discussed in Canada. Decriminalization would mean that possession of small amounts of marijuana would not be a criminal offence in Canada, but would only be a minor offence and would carry a penalty akin to that of a parking ticket. Marijuana has already been made legal, but only use for medicinal purposes, and then only under the supervision of a physician. Decriminalization would apply to recreational use of marijuana. This change is likely the result of a number of factors. First, Canadians do not view marijuana as an addictive substance which is harmful, nor as a drug that will lead to the use of more harmful drugs. Second, many older Canadians, including many of Canada's lawmakers, came of age in the 1960s and 1970s when the use of marijuana was common amongst young people, and many of these lawmakers themselves have used the substance with no ill effects. Third, the costs of enforcement (i.e., policing and court costs) of existing marijuana prohibition laws are large. In other words, the costs of enforcement are high relative to its benefits. Given that this is the case, it seems reasonable to decriminalize marijuana. A recent non-scientific poll by the *Globe and Mail* showed that about one-half of Canadians believe that the reason the Government of Canada has not moved forward with decriminalization is because of pressure from the United States which fears that Canadian marijuana may make its way south of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel. The prevailing wisdom seems to be that if the cost exceeds the benefit, enforcement is not worthwhile and if people want to use marijuana, so be it.

The recent war in Iraq is another area which Canadians and Americans diverge. The majority of Canadians were largely against the war and then-Prime Minister Jean Chretien decided not to send troops as part of "coalition of the willing." The thinking in Canada was that the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein may or may not have had weapons of mass destruction, but that the United Nation's process should be allowed to run its course. A recent online forum conducted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) asked expatriates in either country to comment on their experiences, and a number of their comments are indicative of the divide between the two countries.<sup>8</sup> Americans living in

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<sup>7</sup> There is some problem with the definition of marriage. Many people who would like to see same-sex couples have the same rights as heterosexual couples oppose changing the definition of marriage from the current definition of the union between one man and one woman.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.cbc.ca/canadaus/canus\\_panel.html](http://www.cbc.ca/canadaus/canus_panel.html) (accessed December 23, 2004).



Canada said:

“I have the impression that the mainstream news media in the [United] States is not very comfortable with any story that might be considered critical of the government or the military.”

“When I get into discussions with American friends and family, I find they have a tendency to state as fact things that have been alleged by politicians or in the media, and when I bring up other stories I’ve read in Canadian news, they seem shocked that there IS any other news.”

“I try to explain that Canada is not anti-American, but acting as a good friend who tells you if you are wrong.”

Canadians living in the United States said the following:

“The radio talk show rhetoric and lambasting of anything not supportive of the war is unnerving at times. A lot of it stems from the basic insular attitude of Americans towards the outside world, reflected by media reporting, but more so the fact that from the time you are a toddler, you grow up learning that you are part of the best, greatest free nation on earth.”

“...when any international conflict begins, it is seen as treasonous to question the government. This is antithetical to everything I have been raised to believe in as a Canadian.”

During his visit to Ottawa in late-2004, President George Bush said: “I made some decisions that some in Canada didn’t agree with. But I do what I think is right and will continue to do what I think is right.”<sup>9</sup> The Bush visit was hailed as part of the Bush strategy to smooth relations with important allies such as Canada. While his comments may sound conciliatory on the surface, they angered many Canadians who felt that they reflected the

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<sup>9</sup> Oliver Moore, “Foreign Policy Has Rankled Canadians, Bush Admits,” *Globe and Mail*, November 30, 2004. Online at [www.globeandmail.com](http://www.globeandmail.com) (accessed December 20, 2004).

fact that Bush and his supporters were not willing to tolerate other points of view. This theme also came out in the U.S. presidential elections in November 2004 when Democratic candidate John Kerry was repeatedly chastised by the Bush campaign for merely suggesting that the United States should consult with her allies on important foreign policy matters.

Sometimes this tolerance is taken to the extreme, as was expressed regarding the issue of Quebec separation. In 1980 and 1995 the Quebec government held referenda on the province becoming an independent country. In the latter case, the “oui” vote almost resulted in Quebec independence. Still there was never any talk of having the Canadian military force Quebec to remain part of Canada against her will (even though leaving Canada would have been a clear violation of international law). The federal government simply wanted to make sure that any question asked of Quebecers would be clear so that the vote would be fair in the event of a future referendum.

Similarly, is there any other nation on earth that would allow a political party whose sole purpose is the dissolution of the country to be the official opposition in its federal parliament (as the Bloc Quebecois was in 1993)?

## Conclusion

Canada is a proud member of the international community. It accepts the best (and sometimes the worst) from all over the world. As such, Canadian culture is a hybrid of these influences. Canadians are individualistic, but only to a point, usually that of the greater community's welfare. A concern for collective welfare was very much part of Aboriginal culture prior to the arrival of Europeans, and it was enhanced by the French and English as well as the other immigrants that followed.

Most international comparisons reveal that Canada always falls somewhere between the United States and Europe in terms of attitudes, values, etc. It is this bringing together of the world's cultures, and the resultant tolerance necessary to live with each other, that is the real strength of Canada. To do this, it is necessary to be open minded and accepting of others. This is something Canadians do to a fault. This characteristic also is manifest in the Canadian sense of humour.

Canada is a young country; it has existed a mere 137 years. To put this in context, when the United States was the same age as Canada is today it was 1913 and the country was still

forming its national identity. No one would argue today that the United States does not have a unique culture and identity. To compare Canada to Japan it is noteworthy that the Meiji Period began only in 1868, one year after Canadian Confederation.

Canadians may never represent a well-defined or recognizable “national personality” to foreigners as many other countries of Europe or Asia; diverse languages, ethnicities and a multiplicity of backgrounds may be too numerous for one “voice” to be heard. Nonetheless, does Canada have a unique culture? Yes, it does. Has this culture been defined for the reader? Perhaps not. Canadian culture is still in the making; whereas some elements — federal politics, a linguistic duality, and universal health care — are clearly apparent, others are less so. How then can we define Canadian culture? We can’t, not yet, not completely. “Canada is Canada,” says Will Ferguson (1997: 210). “You can’t understand it. Don’t try.”

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