

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

"A Sort-of Nation"

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Dear Peter,

Canada is up against laws of nature and the spirit of the age. Entropy holds that everything put together sooner or later falls apart; the news of the world is about decentralization, the breakup of encrusted empires, elites and alliances, the self-destruction of established states. Add to this frame of reference the emerging new paradigm of the cosmos called Chaos, and Canada seems an unlikely country to last out the century, at least as a unified whole.

The principles and understandings upon which Canada was established in the nineteenth century were inherited from the Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century, the age of Spinoza, who said that "the purpose of nature is to make men uniform, as children of a common Mother." The dominant worldview during the early years of Confederation was thus that nature itself demanded standardization, uniformity, universality, immutability. Now, explains Jane Jacobs, in her compact and ideosyncratic assessment of the separatist issue, we look upon nature as being hostile toward uniformity and insistent on diversity. This puts Canada in a bit of a pickle.

"At the time the underlying cultural values for Canada were laid down, the ideal of uniformity and and universality as still operating full force. As a heritage, it has left us deeply uneasy about the separateness of English French Canada and with a supposition that it represents some sort of social or political failure. That idea has been dinned into us by novelists and by politicians, and especially by the historians of English-speaking Canada.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

We are supposed to feel inadequate, somehow even guilty, for maintaining two solitudes. Our mission, we were given to understand from way back, was to dissolve differences."

The attempt to hold Canada together with rhetorical homage to "two founding nations" and the policy of bilingualism can thus be viewed as instances of a cultural lag, whereas Quebec's on-and-off impulses toward independence are more in keeping with contemporary perspectives on the ecological virtues (and political inevitability) of division into smaller, sustainable and more manageable units. The clash of old and new worldviews has yet to yield a predictable outcome. As author Peter Brimelow put it, "Canada in the 1980s is more than ever in a state of frozen crisis, in which its internal contradictions are suspended but not solved." It is this pattern of benumbed turbulence that makes Canada appear chaotic, in the ultramodern sense of the word.

The new science of chaos offers a world of opportunities for distortion, misinterpretation, and other forms of abuse by non-scientists. I have heard the principles of chaos invoked by poets, astrologers, financial analysts, and the heads of day-care centers. Colin Low, a living legend in Canada's renowned documentary film industry, gave the simple answer at a public screening recently to a complicated question about how to explain the qualitative aspects of American television. He merely uttered the word "chaos", and his audience seemed immediately to grasp the allusion.

The expropriation of this new-fangled physics by politicians and their speechwriters cannot be far behind. Perhaps I am just ahead of them? Chaos theory does lend itself, at least superficially, to radical political analysis, if radical is understood to mean fundamental and not revolutionary. A radical approach to comprehending contemporary Canadian politics is made easier by keeping in mind the rudimentary postulate of chaos theory, that the outcome of any process of interactive development is highly dependent on "initial conditions." While in the scientific world this heightened sensitivity to origins is helping to explain the extraordinary and even awesome differences between present patterns in nature (clouds, waves, etc.) and their antecedent forces, in politics the same sensitivity is more likely to reveal why current patterns of public policy and behavior continue to echo the past, in defiance of the wishes and expectations of the policymakers themselves.

More concretely, the absence of any basic unity in Canada today is the result of an original condition in the country's creation, namely the political merging of two hostile groups after one had conquered militarily the other. Britain's victory was final, but incomplete, in that the then-majority French did not relinquish their culture. Short of genocide (unthinkable in 1760) or mass expulsion (The British had already deported 15,000 Acadians, but could hardly rid themselves of 60,000 Quebeckers),

there was no effective way of forcing cultural uniformity. Nothing much has happened, really, to alter the embryonic formula. "The shotgun union of the two Canadas, French and English," writes Jacobs, "proved neither happy nor fruitful. Each partner kept hoping, in vain, to reform the other into something closer to its heart's desire." And so, in future, it may be proper (even if impolitic) to speak of the Canadas.

In a previous newsletter I made reference to Peter Brimelow's contention that Canada is not a nation. Since then I have seized upon several interrelated questions about the substance of nationhood, and have discovered a number of interesting observations about Canada's peculiar form of "national unity." As you will doubtless surmise in due course, I am still trying to get the best possible fix on just where Canada fits into the scheme of world politics, whether it is a country still in the process of achieving a unique form of greatness prescribed by destiny, or whether it is devolving, inexorably, into something less than an independent state with one authoritative voice in foreign affairs and one overriding authentic allegiance in the hearts of its people.

The national question seems to me a basic one not only in understanding Canada, but in comprehending the dramatic events taking place on the world stage, which more often than not involve the struggle for political rights and economic freedom on the part of minority groups. Contrary to conventional wisdom among theoreticians and practitioners of power politics, even the weakest of conquered peoples are resistant to assimilation. Now more than ever the resilience of suppressed nations and ethnic minorities is a destabilizing factor in inter"national" affairs, as the current uprisings in the Near East and the Soviet Union amply demonstrate. Leaders and diplomats are looking for solutions to the internal problems that bedevil their foreign relations. As long as self-determination and human rights remain the focus of so much international attention, Canada is sure to come under increasing scrutiny from abroad.

What, then, is a nation? I salvaged several definitions from some old files that warrant consideration here. The late Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Protestant theologian who also involved himself in foreign policy issues in the 1950s, viewed nations as "territorial societies, the cohesive power of which is supplied by the sentiment of nationality and the authority of the state." Canada is most definitely a territorial society: attachment to the land is manifested in Canadian literature (English and French), in Canadian art (the famous Group of Seven painters all specialized in landscapes), in Canada's official motto ("ad mare usque ad mare"--from sea to shining sea), and in the perennial preoccupation on the part of Canadian governments with territorial issues such as arctic sovereignty, northern development, offshore fishing rights, acid rain. "Who are we?"

is an outdated way to raise the question of national identity in Canada; it has for a long time been supplanted by "Where is Here?" a more satisfyingly indigenous and land-based phrase coined by literary scholar Northrop Frye.

What is clearly missing in Canada, however, is the "cohesive power" of shared sentiment and central authority. English- and French-Canadians have, for the most part, quite different feelings about Canadian history. Most people in both groups may indeed care deeply about Canada, but the object of their respective devotions is the same in name only. It may be that recent immigrants, happy to have escaped poverty, repression, or even worse in the mostly Third World homelands do have a common, altogether positive affection for the freedom and relative prosperity Canada offers to them, but such voices have yet to be heard in Parliament or at the highest levels of finance and industry and the media.

As for the authority of the state, it is by now a well-known fact that Canada has one of the least-centralized governments in the world. The provinces own their own resources, levy their own taxes, hold responsibility for education, health care, and law enforcement, and in some cases sustain separate political parties. More than that, they are often at loggerheads with the federal government. Many Canadians may look to Ottawa for protection, for leadership, and for money, but many more regard the operations of central authority with disdain.

By Niebuhr's yardstick, then, Canada does not quite measure up to be a nation. Let's try another, more romantic definition, this one from the Sorbonne scholar and scribe Ernest Renan. "What constitutes a nation," he wrote in 1882, "is not speaking the same tongue or belonging to the same ethnic group, but having accomplished great things in common in the past and the wish to accomplish them in the future." This is almost poetry--it equates the essence of nationhood with that of the poet (whose name escapes me) who held that life in general is a mixture of memory and desire.

This is the kind of nation envisioned by Pierre Trudeau in the briefly romantic period of the late 1960s, and by his French-Canadian forbear Sir Wilfred Laurier, who served as Canada's Prime Minister from 1896 to 1911. In the absence of popular and visionary leadership, however, such a lyrical approach to nationality rings hollow; it denies both the real emotions tied up in language and ethnicity and it ignores the political fact that there are no accessible great historical achievements revered in common by all Canadians nor a shared image of future greatness. Canadians will go on doing great things, but not together. The First World War is often cited by anglophone historians as the crucible of nationhood for Canada, but conscription precipitated a political crisis in Quebec. French-Canadians took a different view of the trenches than their English counterparts, who willingly flocked to battle in service to the British Empire. Pierre Chauvreau, the first premier of Quebec, seems to have been more catholic in his perspective, and

more prescient:

"English and French, we climb by a double flight of stairs towards the destinies reserved for us on the continent, without knowing each other, without meeting each other, and without even seeing each other except on the landing of politics. In social and literary terms we are far more foreign to each other than the English and French of Europe."

Chauvreau wrote this over a hundred years ago. It appears largely true today as well. Outside of small circles of university intellectuals and the francophone enclaves spread thinly across Canada, Quebec society is still alien. The writers and artists and performers who are culture heroes and heroines in Quebec life are unknown outside the province. It would seem that a collective effort to do something genuinely futuristic, like joining in the great leap spaceward, might be the thing to bridge the culture gap. But the expansion of Canada's Space Agency is hobbled by the unwillingness of a number of scientists and professionals to relocate from the Ottawa area to the new headquarters at St. Hubert, which is nearer Montreal and in Quebec. Canada lacks a sufficiently attractive or compelling collective mission that can transcend deeply-rooted divisions. It is not quite a nation.

This may be a vague, esoteric generalization--it certainly strikes me that way from time to time--but then I am reminded in the most prosaic settings that in Canada such amorphous topics as nationhood are sometimes truly the stuff of daily life. A chance encounter with a schoolteacher in a parking lot, for example, went something like this:

She: "What brings you to Canada?"

Me: "Oh, some independent research on nationalism, and multiculturalism--that sort of thing."

She: "That's interesting. You know, it's too bad but we just can't afford the way we live anymore, printing everything in two languages, trying to satisfy everybody's desire for separate this and separate that. It costs an arm and a leg. There simply aren't enough Canadians to pay for it all."

Me: "Yes, it does seem costly..."

She: "My husband works for the government. He can tell you how much paper is wasted, and how long it takes to get things translated and finally printed. [pause] I hope you're bilingual."

Me: "Well, we're working on it..."

She: "By the way, I've just written an essay on whether Canada is

a nation or not, and I ended up saying "sort of."

If not a nation, or if just a semblance of one, then what is Canada? What's the most accurate word or non-academic phrase to describe this country?

The late Rene Levesque, a journalist who became the charismatic leader of the separatist Parti Quebecois and premier of Quebec, referred to Canada as a "hybrid bicultural monstrosity." No lyrical romanticism there, although the underlying emotion is evident. Focusing more on that lack of cohesive power, Fortune editor Herbert Meyer wrote this about Canada in 1976:

"The provinces are so different, so independent, so much at odds with each other, and with Ottawa, that it is hardly an exaggeration to describe Canada not as a country, but rather as an idea for a country that has not yet come into being. ...Think of Canada as a collection of notes; do not think of it as music."

The following bit of paradox, written by the British-American economist Kenneth Boulding, keeps popping up in other people's commentaries about the Canadian identity. At first it sounded deeply insightful, even profound; on later reflection, the passage seems nonsensical. See what you think.

"Canada has no cultural unity, no linguistic unity, no economic unity, no geographic unity. All it has is unity."

The statement is for me troubling enough to provoke an attempt to deconstruct its component parts, the idea being that by looking at each assertion separately, in light of some detail, the conclusion might regain some solidity.

Canada's cultural dualism--coexistence without coalescence of English and French--is well known. Multiculturalism is also by now a familiar term. What is seldom talked about, outside of graduate seminars, at least, is just what the root word "culture" is all about. My best guess, based on others' learned theses, is that culture connotes a system of values. Canada, to follow Boulding's phrase, thus lacks a uniform system of values. English-Canadians cling to a set of moral tenets and political traditions inherited from the British, and it is the subtle but supremely important distinctions between this variant of "English" values and that of the Americans that keeps Canadian culture apart from ours. "Canada may be a loose federation of wildly diverse regions on the margins of the civilized world," writes journalist Peter C. Newman. "But there is a quiver of common intent that holds us together: it is the conviction that

we want to remain Canadian and that no matter how tempting it is or may become, we do not want to be Americans."

You know this beat. We fought for Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness; they evolved a constitutional set-up based on Peace, Order and Good Government. Canada stuck with the parliamentary system while Americans forged a republic. State-owned enterprise is anathema and individual property rights are sacrosanct in our country; democratic socialism remains a legitimate political possibility for Canada.

French Canadians also have concerns about Americanization, but they are muted by the security blanket of a separate language. It is a mistake, I have learned, to underestimate the importance of language as the mobile repository of values and hence the guarantor of culture. It is easy enough, with a rudimentary grasp of French, to see and hear how some words and turns of phrase are difficult to translate efficiently and effectively into English (and vice-versa.) But it is still difficult to comprehend, without a background in linguistics, how language can divide a citizenry on the basis of values. My next door neighbor speaks about the years of frustration he experienced as an aide to a member of Parliament because other staff were French-speaking and from Quebec. Everyone was reasonably proficient in both languages, but they could not understand how the other thought. The motivations and mechanics of the francophone mind were a mystery to him then, my friend reports, and they remain a mystery to this day.

I once believed, a long time ago, that learning a foreign language was like tapping into a different soul. I gave up this notion when "soul" became too difficult a concept and my French skills began to wither. Now the idea is back, in a more secular but nonetheless powerful and mysterious frame of reference. In an essay entitled "Canada: the Challenge of Coexistence", Victor Goldbloom asserts that

"Language has become the most sensitive component of the average Canadians' sense of identity, the one that emits the strongest (and often most unreasoning) emotion when touched; religion, which used to have that characteristic, has faded in reactivity in recent years. Survival, the assurance of a continuity from a living past to a living posterity, is seen in linguistic terms by Canadians wherever their language group is locally, regionally, or nationally in the minority."

Language is why Canada has no cultural unity. I don't know for sure his reasoning, but Boulding got that one right. The same argument holds, of course, for the lack of linguistic unity. We could simply add the fifteen percent of Canadians for whom neither French nor English is mother tongue--the large Italian, Greek, Portuguese and Chinese communities in the cities, and the

Ukrainians and Germans and others in the prairies--also cling to the language of their ancestral homelands as an anchor of cultural values.

Canada has no economic unity, says Professor Boulding. Dozens of Canadian economists and historians and political scientists would agree. So would dozens of non-Canadian experts. We can leave it at that for now. Canada also has no geographic unity. Yes. The country is too huge (about 10 million square kilometers), too sparsely populated (27 people per thousand hectares), too much subdivided by inhospitable landforms like the Canadian Shield and the Arctic tundra and multiple vectors of the Rocky Mountains to be anything but what scores of geographers agree is a country of distinct regions.

Without any kind of national unity one can put a finger on, or justify in accordance with definitions, Canada is still a country with well defined borders, a refined constitution, a peaceful social order, a high standard of living, an independent foreign policy and a somewhat sterling international reputation, both in terms of politics and in the arts. So who needs unity? Perhaps this was what Boulding was getting at, a unity made up of intangibles, a quiet, invisible unity of unrealized but still conceivable expectations, what Jane Fonda might have sensed when she said "When I'm in Canada, I feel like this is what the world should be like."

Cheers,

Stephen Maly

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