

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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"Shadows of Doubt"

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Dear Peter,

All I can offer in this introductory communique is a pastiche of first impressions about Canada. My observations are not wholly fresh, since I have been studying Canada for years, and they will not be wholly original either, as I have spent most of my working hours this first month clipping daily newspapers, chatting with federal bureaucrats, monitoring radio and television programs, listening to speeches, watching people and reading books. No doubt the opinions of some of this country's articulate political journalists have become conveniently mixed up with my own confusion about what seems to be happening here.

So far, this melange of informal activity has inspired some serious questioning of a number of cliches about what distinguishes Canadians from Americans. Comparing the two neighboring peoples has become a cottage industry among academics recently, and although the litany of distinctions quickly grows tiresome and repetitive, it is an unavoidable first topic of discussion. Along these lines, I would direct your attention to a 60-page special report in the July 3 edition of Maclean's magazine entitled "Portrait of Two Nations." The series of articles cover all the familiar themes and include some surprising poll data, such as the 23 percent of Quebecers asked (compared to 14 percent of Canadians as a whole) who favored Canada becoming the 51st state.

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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.

I am also beginning to see widening cracks in the edifice of established myth about the Canadian identity, another subject that has generated an unending discourse in the literature of politics and culture. I have a sinking feeling that the Canada I have long admired from a distance and have now come to witness first-hand might not last beyond the next half-century, and this unanticipated (perhaps premature) skepticism tends to undermine my own basic premise that Canada's conscious embrace of bilingualism and multiculturalism is a model for other societies to emulate.

Before venturing any further into these deep and darkening waters, however, let me back up a bit, to my undramatic crossing of the world's longest undefended international boundary. Let's face it: the U.S.-Canada border is nothing akin to the Iron Curtain or the well-guarded frontiers between, say, China and the Soviet Union. Driving through a customs and immigration station along the 49th parallel is at best a minor thrill, and at most a minor inconvenience for law-abiding citizens of either country. Canadian author Peter Newman nevertheless refers to the political demarcation line that has "no real topographical, ethnic or economic justification" as the most important fact about Canada. "It defines not only our citizenship but how we behave collectively and what we think individually." It is difficult to fathom how a surveyor's line and the political abstractions tied to it can carry so much weight, especially if one recalls, with any fondness at all for cynical truths, that Ambrose Bierce defined territorial boundaries as imaginary lines between two nations, "separating the imaginary rights of one from the imaginary rights of another."

No matter the real and perhaps permanent significance of the border itself, the political drama of Canada appears for the most part to be a psychological one. It is what is going on inside Canadians' heads that matters most, especially now, when the everyday goings-on of ordinary people in the material world are so much the same throughout the western industrialized world, most obviously here in North America. What are Canadians thinking when they learn of global events; when they confront (or contemplate) nature; when they welcome foreigners in their midst; when they meet up with Americans? Eminent sociologists have done their best to answer such questions in the past. Some of the studies by Seymour Martin Lipset, for example, go straight to the heart of Canadian values, and how they are manifested in social attitudes and public institutions. But well-documented patterns are starting to shift, and noticeably so.

If indeed it is the border with the United States that symbolizes what Canada is and is not, what will happen to the smaller country when the processes of economic integration and

cooperation in continental defense make the border increasingly irrelevant in commercial and strategic terms? Even more important, I think, is a question of how Canadians will respond to changing values in the United States--the "Canadianization" of certain policies regarding health insurance and gun control, for example--as well as to regional interests, particularly in the West and in Quebec, that support even closer ties to the U.S. than already exist.

I am jumping ahead of myself, with no answers and an undigested feast of clues. Let me back up once more, to describe only a few instances and indications of Canada's current state of metamorphosis.

Somewhere on the north shore of Lake Superior, just off the TransCanada highway, we stopped at what was purported to be a "world famous" amethyst mine, where passersby can, for a small fee, collect bucketfuls of semi-crushed ore bearing gemstone crystals. This was a working mine, according to the litter of signs posted shrewdly at every bend in the 5-mile-long driveway, but there was little evidence of activity when we finally arrived. A rusted-out truck bed was labelled "mine viewing area", and the view was of an eroded gorge about 100 feet across with no discernible mineral merit, just a few puddles of muddy water and some abandoned oil drums. It was a depressing place, made all the more dull by an encroaching bank of low, moisture-laden clouds.

My wife (a geologist) was a bit more enthusiastic about all this broken-up rock, and she entered into a casual conversation with a middle-aged woman who managed the gift shop. This storekeep was clearly happy to have a customer, and before long she made the usual enquiries regarding place of origin and purpose of visit. Perhaps forgetting for the moment that we were in a tourist trap and not still at the border crossing, Alice gave the curious clerk an honest, somewhat detailed reply that included a mention of nationalism, Quebec separatism, and ethnic minorities. This brief summary elicited from Madame cashier a torrent of invective against bilingualism, the metric system, immigration policies, and all things French Canadian. She was fed up with Quebec ("all take and no give") and implied that serious, even violent, confrontations may be on the horizon. She capped-off her argument with a non-sequitur about the sorry state of Canada's defenses, lamenting that the country could be taken over without a fight, but forgetting (perhaps purposefully, considering her audience) to specify by whom.

This turned out not to be an isolated case of overt hostility towards Quebec on the part of English Canadians. A surprising number of Canadians we've met so far, in fact, speak openly about their frustrations with the Francophone province.

A recent Gallup poll underscores the sentiment: 52 percent of English Canadians believe that Quebeckers want to separate from Canada. The 1980 referendum on sovereignty-association, defeated by a 60 percent majority in the province, apparently did not convince other Canadians of Quebec's loyalty to the confederation. (Much of the current wrangling concerns a pending amendment to the Constitution--called the Meech Lake accord--and controversial language legislation, developments that will be explored in subsequent reports.) In short, it is not unusual to hear anglophone Canadians spout off about the French, especially after a few beers. I have yet to hear the "shove off" school of thought articulated in mixed (i.e. English and French) company, but that is only fitting in a society known for its civility and an historic division into "two solitudes." Still, when a political science professor and long-time federalist from Alberta predicts ultimate failure, and an urbane francophone economist from Montreal admits to rising gut-level anger toward the English, and several veteran Canadian diplomats remark, with sadness, that people have given up on a united Canada, you start to take the pub talk and backyard blustering more seriously.

Public concerns about immigrants and the growing proportion in Canada of what are called "visible minorities" are also on the rise. The views of the bristly amethyst merchant from northern Ontario may be somewhat extreme, but they are not isolated. A friend from the Canadian Consulate in Minneapolis is worried about what a large influx of Hong Kong Chinese and other Asian people is going to mean for his hometown Vancouver. He cited the inflationary impacts of soaring property values and the social impacts of a growing cadre of Asian immigrant children whose habits of discipline in school are making it difficult for others to score high marks. This could mean more trouble ahead, when students become job-seekers in a highly-competitive environment. In Sault Ste. Marie, over pancakes and a shared pot of coffee in a railroad dining car, a couple on holiday from their southern Ontario farm remarked that Toronto and other cities in Canada seemed more and more foreign to them as time passed by and Third World immigrants flooded in. The "flood", as it were, is more perception than reality, according to statistical reports (visible minorities comprise only 6.3 percent of the population), but of course it's public perception that counts the most. (Coincidentally, the cover story in the July 10 Maclean's is entitled "An Angry Racial Backlash: Canada's Ethnic Mosaic Under Attack." You will hear more about this issue too in future newsletters.)

None of this tension is evident on the streets of Ottawa, where roughly 35 percent of the city's residents are of French descent, where bilingualism is a basic requirement for job promotion, and where multiculturalism runs riot, especially during Canada Day festivities. An outpouring of visible and audible homage to the multicultural ethic of Canada did not stop when the national holiday weekend was over. Since then, I have been served by East Indian clerks, Caribbean postal workers, a Portuguese barber, and a Sikh security guard. Most of the women and children who ride the same bus we do speak Spanish. There are Egyptians in the neighborhood. A fellow we met at a party recently, himself a Spaniard, recounted how the staff at his restaurant resembled a mini-United Nations. India, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Turkey, Nicaragua, Poland, Iran, Iraq and a few others--he jokingly added Quebec to the list--are all represented in the kitchen. Everyone seems to get along, at least in this setting.

Ottawa is a government town. Most of the city's approximately 350,000 inhabitants work in federal agencies, and most of the remainder work for the province of Ontario, the city itself, one of several universities, or in the service sector, providing basic needs--restaurants, bars, hotels, mortgages, vcrs, recreation, the arts, etc.--to the multi-layered bureaucracy. This concentration of loyal servants of the state helps explain, I believe, the difference between the atmosphere of the federal capital and the more troubled social environment elsewhere. Ottawa is the centrepiece of official Canada, the place where myths are generated by Cabinet ministers and kept alive by civil servants.

The myth of multicultural harmony is easily believable in Ottawa. The mosaic is apparently less smooth elsewhere in the country. A recent poll indicates that nearly one quarter of the residents of Toronto, Canada's largest city, claim they have been the victims of racial or ethnic discrimination. And you need travel only a few hundred kilometers west of the capital, and then keep going all way to the Pacific Ocean, and outside of government (or university) circles you may never hear a kind word about the province and people of Quebec.

I hope I am exaggerating about the depth of division between English and French Canadians. Afterall, they've been living together without mass violence for nearly 300 years. But the gap between the official version of the Canadian state and the unofficial views of the country's private citizens is obvious. The Governor General's Canada Day address raised the rhetorical question of whether there is a country anywhere else on earth with "less reason to complain." From the vantage point of Rideau Hall, the elegant residence of the Queen's representative in Canada (a French Canadian woman named Jean Sauve), there cannot be much to complain about. Parliament is out of session for the summer, so there won't be the usual thumping in the House of

Commons until September. The Prime Minister is in Paris, speaking for Canada at an economic summit, and thus for a short while anyway out of range of his many domestic critics. Unemployment across Canada has fallen to the lowest level (7.3 percent) in nearly a decade. It looks as if President Bush is serious about reducing acid rain, as are high-ranking members of Congress. Streams of tourists from America, Europe and other parts of the world are queuing up at Ottawa's many splendid attractions. The weather is perfect--even, according to the ten o'clock newscast, for sleeping. All is well in the peaceable kingdom.

It doesn't take much to spoil the picture, however. Canadians are surely among the blessed peoples of the world, with such a huge, richly endowed country, such a fertile mixture of human resources, and so many true believers working hard to nourish and fortify democratic ideals through the medium of the public sector. But the complaints are many, ranging from language and immigration issues already mentioned to the planned imposition of a national sales tax, the dismantling of Canada's passenger rail service and a plethora of minor political scandals in Ontario and other provinces that are undermining faith in government. A Maclean's poll shows that 36 percent of Canadians feel that government can "hardly ever" act in the public interest. Another 8 percent said "never." (By comparison, a lesser proportion of Americans--32 and 5 percent, respectively--said the same thing.) This is remarkable, given the degree of government intervention in the economy and the traditional respectability of state institutions.

A myopic reading of day-to-day news accounts might lead one to the sombre speculation that Canada is, in fact, slowly but inexorably disassembling itself as a country. On Canada Day, at about the same time throngs of people were singing the national anthem in both English and French during an official ceremony, a different crowd was picketing in front of the Legislative Assembly buildings in Victoria, British Columbia, demonstrating support for making English the only official language in the province. During the subsequent week, the media carried stories about the demise of VIA rail, the continued sell-off of Air Canada to private investors, deep cuts in the budget of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the signing of a mutual defense treaty by 9 native bands whose chiefs declared that all other avenues toward the settlement of land claims and other rights issues with federal and provincial governments have been exhausted. The Council of Canadians, a prominent and outspoken group of nationalists, is complaining loudly about the recently-forged trade agreement between the United States and Canada. Citing figures on plant closures and job losses since the pact entered into effect last January, the Council argues that free trade will bring about the end of Canada as a sovereign nation capable of making economic decisions independently of the United

States. Privatization of publicly-owned enterprises, shrinking commitments to Canada's poorer regions under the pressure of budget restraints, the inability to settle fundamental disputes affecting the country's constitutional order: it's as if the mosaic of peoples and network of interests that make up Canada are starting to break apart for want of a national glue.

As a newcomer to Canada, it is difficult to distinguish routine complaints and partisan politics from the controversies that signify deep divisions. I found a book, however, that lends substance to my own superficial apprehensions. In The Patriot Game: National Dreams and Political Realities, author Peter Brimelow (a former columnist for Canada's Financial Post newspaper) sets forth these unflattering arguments about Canada:

1. Canada is merely a geographical expression. For historical reasons, Canada has acquired the legal form of a nation-state, but it is not a nation. Culturally and even geographically, its Anglophone and Francophone communities are growing more separate each year.
2. There are at least two and conceivably seven incipient sub-nations within Canada. By far the most important division is that between English and French Canada, but there are also lesser distinctions within English Canada...[The] divisions constitute political fault lines underlying the Canadian polity.
3. Within the Canadian framework, Quebec is emerging as a genuine nation-state...Quebec is in fact now being treated as a separate entity. But simultaneously Ottawa is trying to prolong Pierre Trudeau's fantasy and treat Anglophones and Francophones as if they had blended into one bilingual whole.
4. All of Anglophone Canada is essentially part of a greater English-speaking North American nation. Canada is a sectional variation within this super nation, just like the American South or Far West, but fundamentally shares the same culture.
5. Canada's political system is badly designed and seriously misrepresents Canadian reality...

Brimelow goes on to make several additional assertions, and then proceeds to develop each one with a wealth of detail.

I don't know yet how many copies of The Patriot Game have been sold in Canada since it was first published (by Key Porter Books Ltd. of Toronto) in 1986, but I cannot imagine it was very well received, at least publicly, by the denizens of the federal bureaucracy or supporters of the Liberal party. I hear in Brimelow's arguments the ring of truth, even though they blemish in many ways the vision of Canada--Trudeau's vision, of "a

brilliant prototype for the moulding of tomorrow's civiliation"-- that first attracted me to this country.

This leads me, finally, to a countervailing observation, so far unaided by the work of scholars and journalists, and definately not in keeping with established myths about Canadians. Myth has it that Canadians are not as patriotic as Americans. This is not true, if patriotism can be measured by outward signs of devotion to country. Canadians keep going on about not wrapping themselves in the flag the way Americans tend to do (notwithstanding the ones that set it on fire or rip it to shreds), but all the while they are making this point there it is, that beautiful maple leaf symbol, draped, hung, stretched, etched and emblazoned on nearly everything in sight. It is one thing to hoist flags on national holidays, and keep them flying above government buildings. It is another thing entirely to put a red maple leaf beneath the golden arches on every McDonald's sign in the country. It may be that the mapleization of commercial display and so much else is aimed squarely at us and not the world at large; it is a non-confrontational way of expressing an intense desire among some Canadians never to become more American than they already are.

There is no complaint more common in Canada than the generic one about Americanization in all its forms and guises. Because of their own regional, ethnic, and linguistic divisions, Canadians may be incapable of an authentic "nationalism", but they have no trouble asserting what they are not, and this shared negative, when added to the maple leaf insignia, suffices to constitute a visible patriotic spirit. And this spirit offers real comfort. Not being American, for example (and perhaps not being nationalistic in general), means not having to endure the taint of an imperialistic foreign policy. Being Canadian, in more positive terms, and in a collective sense, means to be more tolerant and more adept at sharing than are the great mass of Americans. That is the official line, the one that Canadian governments work to perpetuate and the one that people in Ottawa seem to live by, quite sincerely. Outside the capital, outside the realm of policy, and as far removed from the beneficence of government grants, government programs, and government-funded employment as one can get in North America, these fundamental differences start to fade from view, sinking back into the recesses of psychology, or wherever truly private values reside.

Cheers,

Stephen Malby