

Canada—One Country, Two Nations Still

O Canada! You're Wonderful, But Not Yet A Nation

Commentary by Everett C. Ladd

I will admit to feeling a special fondness for Canada. It began with my growing up in Maine, a state with close ties to both Quebec and the Maritime Provinces. It continued when I lived in upstate New York and began formal study of Canadian politics. It is renewed and enhanced each time I visit Canada, especially my favorite place there, Quebec City. Canada is prosperous, peaceful, civil, and democratic.

Yet, if as a *country*, Canada is in many ways successful and estimable, as a *nation* it's really a failure. In the 130 years since the country came into being with passage of the British North America Act (1867), Canadians have not been able, for all their advantages, to create a vivid and compelling sense of a Canadian nation that transcends the ethnic identities of the country's two chief constituent peoples. As the referendum on sovereignty last October 30 showed clearly, the sense of a Quebec or French Canadian nation, rather than a Canadian nation, is even stronger today than it has been historically. Asked in a survey done by Léger & Léger just before the vote whether they think of themselves as Québécois or as Canadians, 58% of the Province's Francophone public said they were "only a Québécois" (29%) or a "Québécois first" (29%); just 12% said they were "Canadian first" (7%), or "only Canadian" (5%). [See p. 23 of this issue].

The continuing strength of French-Canadian nationalism has many sources, some internal to Quebec but others with roots elsewhere in Canada. It was, of course, Great Britain rather than France that won control of Canada, and British rule

that was imposed on Quebec. Most of the country's central institutions—political, economic, and cultural—have reflected British forms and styles. Canadians who trace their ancestry back to the British Isles—now roughly 45% of the population [p. 34]—and their political leaders have often been wildly insensitive to the cultural identity of French Canadians. French Canada might well have been rallied to the idea of a new Canadian nation entirely distinct from

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both Britain and France and their respective heritages; but it could not be rallied to a Canada that was fundamentally British.

The failure to build a compelling new idea for which French Canada would abandon its Frenchness and English Canada its Englishness is well illustrated in the conscription crises that beset the country in both World Wars. When conflict broke out in 1914, for example, Canadians of British background rallied strongly to fight for their motherland, and Canada instituted a military draft. But conscription—seen in terms of fighting for England—was bitterly op-

posed by many French Canadians. By its whole-hearted espousal of conscription, English Canada (and the Conservative Party which represented much of it at the time) alienated much of French Canada. The irony in this comes, of course, in the fact that France and England were allies in the war, not enemies.

Contrast the Canadian conscription crisis to the American experience when, in 1917, this country went to war on the side of Britain and France against Germany. Persons of German ancestry were the second largest ethnic group in America. Nonetheless, while support for going to war was initially less strong in the German-American community than among those of British ancestry, there was certainly no conscription crisis, and the war effort did not divide this country. Long before 1917, an American nation with unambiguous emotional bonds had been firmly established.

As a practical reality, the U.S. is more heterogeneous ethnically than is Canada. Yet, America created what Lincoln called in his Gettysburg Address "a new nation," by offering people from many different heritages a chance to become something that a great majority of them ultimately found was better. They adopted this new emotional attachment without, for the most part, abandoning pride in their ethnic heritage. "E Pluribus Unum," words on the great seal of the United States, became not an empty slogan, but an emotionally vivid reality.

Canada, in contrast, struggled, with but modest success, to define a compelling national idea. There is

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still no Canadian equivalent to the constituent premise of the American nation set forth in the Declaration of Independence. Canadians praise their country's physical beauty and the civility that characterizes its daily life. But they have been unable to make "Canadian" powerfully positive in emotional terms.

Americans should acknowledge that their own country is part of the problem here. The United States is an overwhelming presence in Canadian life. Roughly three-quarters of the Canadian population lives within 90 miles of the U.S. border. Americans ignore Canadian television and other media, but American popular culture flows north abundantly. The population of the U.S. is nine times that of Canada (p. 34) and the Gross Domestic Product twelve times larger (p. 35).

It's hardly surprising, then, that historically Canadian nationalism has held a large element of anti-Americanism. Being Canadian has been defined in significant part as "not American." The U.S. is just too large a presence, both culturally and economically. The strong friendship between the two countries and the extent of their *similarities* have made it even harder to develop and sustain the idea of "Canadian." There have certainly been tensions, and many Canadians worry about the U.S. intruding too much. Still, most Americans and most Canadians see the other as friends. The border between the two countries is indeed long and largely unguarded. Many Americans have Canadian roots. It would have been easier for Canada to have defined a separate national existence if the U.S. really was an enemy. It would have been easier still if Canadian and American ideological assumptions were not so similar. It's often noted that following U.S. independence many thousands of British loyalists emigrated north—between 30,000 and 60,000 to what are now the Maritime Provinces. But,

these loyalists didn't differ from non-emigrating Americans nearly as much as is sometimes thought.¹ Bell and Tepperman are certainly right in arguing that it's simply not true that English Canada emerged from a "pure, pre-modern Tory ideology, opposed to liberal values and full of yearning for the return of a feudal aristocracy." English Canada was not a social replica of England. Quite the contrary. "Indeed, most of the Tories were just as sympathetic to John Locke as their opponents.... Colonists were able, therefore, to subscribe to most of John Locke's principles and yet oppose the call to arms against Britain. Everything turned on deciding which George, George Washington or George III was the true tyrant."

This isn't to dismiss Canadian-U.S. ideological differences, as discussed by such distinguished analysts as Seymour Martin Lipset.² But contemporary opinion research shows clearly that ideological similarities between Canadians and Americans are vastly more substantial than their differences. While Canadians have sought an identity separate from that of America, they are culturally not so very dissimilar.

Beginning in the early 1960s, the Province of Quebec experienced vast social changes that are labelled "The Quiet Revolution." At its core was a broad secularization of Quebec society—aptly described in the piece by Hubert Guindon that follows. One might have expected that the collapse of so much of the traditional culture which had made Québécois distinct from other Canadians—in particular, the place of the Catholic Church—would have weakened Quebec nationalism and thus the push for sovereignty. In one of the most striking results of secularization, the birth rate in the Province—long by far the highest in Canada—has now become the lowest (p. 37). The issue of sovereignty aside, Québécois share much the

same political outlook and concerns as other Canadians.

But as Guindon points out, the push for Quebec sovereignty has in fact grown stronger. The sovereigntists did much better in the 1995 vote than they had in 1980, and their margin among young (18-24 years old) Francophones is now huge—roughly two to one in the October 30 vote (p. 23).

It's not that the rest of Canada has done nothing to try to meet Quebec's concerns. In financial terms, the Province benefits enormously from revenue transfers. Recognition by other Canadians of Quebec's claims as a "distinct society" is far stronger now than ever before (p. 31). But when the large secularized intelligentsia which emerged in the PQ province with the Quiet Revolution began to explore supposed "partnership" that was modern Canada, they discovered it was in large part a fiction. English Canada had not forsworn its Englishness for a larger Canadianness—and for all their growing similarities with other Canadians in social structure and many "postindustrial" values, French Québécois have discovered no compelling emotional substitute for their Frenchness.

Endnotes

¹See, for example, David V. J. Bell and Lorne Tepperman, *The Roots of Disunity: A Look at Canadian Political Culture* (Toronto: MacClelland and Stewart, 1979); and James E. Curtis, et al., "Affiliation with Voluntary Associations: Canadian-American Comparisons," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1989, pp. 143-161.

²Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990).