

## CANADA AND ITS CONTINENTAL FUTURE: A MATTER OF SURVIVAL

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### **Introduction**

This paper offers the interpretation of a geographer looking at Canada in its continental context and seeks to do so from a personal perspective. That perspective comes from an author who has been an immigrant to Canada - although no longer resident there. As with any newcomer (in this case in the mid 1960s), it became necessary to learn how to read the codes and symbols of what it meant to be an English-speaking Canadian. Furthermore, to appreciate the distance between the two solitudes, to use MacLennan's classic phrase. This personal viewpoint is further tempered by experience of a period of study and then work in the American midwest, followed by a return to Canada. From living in British Columbia for seven years a great deal was learned about the view of Canada from the west in contrast to the early years in Ontario. This knowledge gained from the inside has been combined with another long spell observing Canada as an outsider. Being proximate in upstate New York to the Canadian core has restored a vision that is surely more Central Canadian in nature. All in all, a strong comparative perspective has been developed as a consequence of both personal experience and of intellectual predisposition as a geographer. This has led to a search for a sense of, and understanding of, place and regional distinctiveness within the framework of more general social processes.

Survival is a powerful theme in Canadian life and letters, including the arts more generally. An extraordinary degree of toughness and resilience is attributed to Canadians as a consequence of life in the land that God gave to Cain, a niggardly land that supports small populations grudgingly in comparison to the bountiful republic to the warmer south. But what is at issue now is not the survival of individuals or even collectivities (and here one must have particularly in mind the remarkable survival of the French fact in North America, ....but I could also tell of the persistence of Chinese and Sikh communities in the face of racially motivated hostility and long separation from family and kin in their homelands). It is the survival of the territorially based nation-state of Canada as we know it today.

Although the threats to Canada's survival take a particular form, we

should not be especially surprised at the turn of events over the last decade or so. Canada was forged in the latter part of the Nineteenth Century as were a number of other nation-states; the addition of Newfoundland in 1949 also occurred in the modern era. Creating nation states was a modernist project; in these post-modern times, destruction of the existing nation-state system is perhaps highly likely. Certain states are more vulnerable to the pressures of social movements and economic conditions; I assert that Canada is such a state and there are at least two kinds of pressure. One is the pressure upon the nation-state emanating from the development of supra-national forms of governance, forms to which national sovereignty is ineluctably ceded. The second is internal secessionist movements, typically based on the claims of a geographically concentrated minority to exercise self-determination rights. In the case of Canada, the powerful processes of investment, disinvestment and mobility of capital and labour ( all encompassed by the shorthand term 'the global economy') combine to exert pressure of the first kind in the form of trade agreements that bid fair to create a hegemonic economic region centred on the United States. Being a dependent economic partner of the US has made Canada particularly susceptible to this kind of development - its economic well-being is very much a function of how well this relationship is managed. Upward or within-state pressure of the second kind is most evident in the growing strength of separatist or independentist sentiment in Quebec. In short, the Confederation of Canada is being squeezed and bent by both external or global processes and internal or regional processes. It also needs to be recognised that these two sets of processes are not independent of each other.

It is interesting to consider whether or not the federal structure will break apart in the near future. Using the metaphor of that quintessentially Canadian sport, the hockey game, the independentists have scored a goal in the first period with the success in Quebec of the Bloc Quebecois in the recent Federal Election. In the second period, i.e. the next Provincial Election in Quebec, separatist fans are counting on a goal with a Parti Quebecois win. Controlling the game as we move into the third period, the decisive third goal putting the game beyond reach will come from the populace selecting independence for a Sovereign Quebec. The opposing Federalist team is not expected to recover to force the game into sudden-death overtime! If this scenario does come to pass, the Federal structure will indeed break and be in sore need of recasting.

The link between this very real regionally-based threat and external processes can be suggested as follows. The French-Canadian community in

Quebec has historically been economically dependent on English-speaking Canadians and on Americans for investment and hence job creation. However, this is now much less the case with the emergence of a Francophone Capitalist Class and a confidence that a Sovereign Quebec can be a strong partner in a restructured North America comprising the USA, Mexico, Quebec and the remainder of Canada. Thus, the perceived economic immaturity of Quebec and financial apprehensions surrounding the Referendum held while the Parti Quebecois was in power contributed to the defeat of the Sovereignty-Association Option in 1980. Some commentators claim that these fears are much reduced as the Quebecois contemplate a different North America operating under NAFTA; furthermore, by 1995 there will be fewer of the older voters who recall the days of economic dependence on les Anglais and the domination of the English language in the workplaces of Quebec, most notably in the Montreal urban region.

But since its inception the Canadian Federal structure has proven remarkably resilient and adaptable. Most notably, several accommodations have been made to permit the Province of Quebec to create its own programs while the rest of Canada operates under federally managed arrangements. For example, Quebec imposes its own income taxes and has its own pension plan - its special needs in terms of Francophone immigrants are also recognised, a need that has become all the more imperative with the massive decline in the reproduction rate in the Province (so much for the revenge of the cradle). These and other arrangements that recognise the regional diversity of Canada as well as the benefit of regionally specific institutions, such as development authorities in the impoverished Atlantic region and the Canadian wheat board in the west, point in the direction of what is called Asymmetrical Federalism. I would argue that to retain Quebec in a revised Confederation there is a need to move further in this direction of regionally specific actions and institutions. But such a move is checked by at least two sentiments. One, more populist in nature, is that Quebec has already been given too much at the expense of the rest of Canada, a sentiment that resonates with special efficacy in western provinces. This peripheral region with long-established and keenly felt grievances tends to see Quebec as part of the core or central Canada, including Ontario. The élites of this region run national affairs to the core's advantage and the persistent disadvantage of the peripheral regions. The second sentiment is more constitutionally-grounded in that equality of treatment of provinces is now being advocated. There is a clash between the rise of a rights-based political philosophy that has its basis in the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms (the ultimate expression of Trudeauite Liberalism)

and a collectivist philosophy which recognises that collectivities exist, such as the French-Canadian nation, *Les Canadiens*. When the latter are concentrated within one province there is a case for special status for such a distinct society and for the province of its residence. The rapid growth of charter-based thinking in the last decade moves Canadian values and thinking closer to an American model with an emphasis on equality and non-discrimination; there is also a growing empowerment of the individual who can seek redress from the law. Charter-based thinking has been invoked to oppose special treatment for provinces since to promote asymmetry is to offend regional equity as a principle.

What, then, can be done? Despite the pleas to abandon constitutional matters and focus on pressing economic issues such as the unemployment rate ( now in excess of 11 per cent) and the burden of public indebtedness at both the Federal and Provincial levels, there is a need to continue to engage in debate on the nature of federalism and its territorial or geographical basis. Even those who say let Quebec go and that will be an end of it, must recognise that the rest of Canada would have to attend to Federalism in the light of a new geopolitical reality in North America. Engaging Federalism requires attention to many complex issues but here I want to focus on three: values, regions and identity.

### *Values*

A number of scholars have identified and analyzed differences in fundamental values that differentiate Canada from the United States. Most recently, Lipset (1990) has provided a comprehensive statement. His argument is that central, organising, societal, principles vary cross-nationally; from this, many institutional differences derive which in turn influence everyday life; even as one can acknowledge the existence of a North American way of life which seeps throughout the Continent. Lipset characterises Canada as "A more class-aware, elitist, law-abiding, statist, collectivity-oriented and particularistic (group-oriented) society than the United States" (p.8). What is important about these differences is that they suggest that what makes Canada different from the dominating super-power next door is not the fact of Quebec with its obviously distinctive culture and language but, rather, fundamental value systems. Thus, if Quebec were to become Sovereign, it would be a mistake to assume that Canada would simply slip inevitably into union with the United States - for these value and institutional differences will do much to maintain a degree of separation. One

can certainly argue that the values of collective orientation and statism are deeply entrenched in Quebec where survival of the French language and a distinctive culture are extremely important in terms of group identity. With the decline in the power of the Catholic Church attendant upon the demise of the rural peasant society, the State, (that is, the Provisional Government) has become the chief instrument of cultural and hence collective preservation. But statism is important in the rest of Canada too, despite attempts to privatise public service provision at both the Federal and Provincial level. The role of Provincial Governments remains especially strong in the Canadian Federation, in contrast to the States in the American Union. Spending by Provincial Governments in Canada has, in proportional terms, been about twice that of State Governments; in the USA, the Federal Government is paramount not only psychologically but also in spending terms. There is also a stronger commitment to the principle of an ordered society within Canada, both within Quebec and the rest of Canada, than is the case in the US where individual pursuit of freedoms and personal well-being prevails. Thus, Canadians are more willing to accept rules and restraints on individual acts to achieve this goal of public order. While there are powerful economic interactions in North America that bind many parts of Canada to American markets, the value differences that I have briefly outlined may very well serve to maintain Canada as a distinct political entity even without Quebec.

### *Regions*

Geographers have identified two types of regions in conducting their studies. These are referred to as formal and functional; sometimes these are combined to create composite regions. A good example of the first type is a political territory as all residents and all places share a uniform attribute by virtue of their location within a well-defined and clearly bounded territory. This, as we will see shortly, is also of considerable importance in the social construction of identity. The second type of region is often exemplified by economic interaction which defines market areas or social behaviour that leads to the identification of a neighbourhood, without there being a clear and legally binding definition of boundaries or even unanimity on the boundary question.

Canada certainly exhibits both kinds of regions, posing some interesting challenges in the construction of a new form of Federalism. Given the nature of the existing federal system and its particular territorial dimensions, the critical formal region in Canada in this context is the

Province. The most immediate threat to Confederation is, after all, that one Provincial unit will withdraw, creating a particularly awkward geography with four Provinces isolated on Quebec's eastern flank from the rest of Canada. Given the historic orientation of the Maritime Provinces to New England and Boston in particular (I do not include Newfoundland in this grouping), it is this region that is often identified as the most vulnerable and the one most likely to seek some kind of accommodation with the US. Whether the US is at all interested in absorbing an economically disadvantaged region with a declining resource base (consider the devastating loss of the Atlantic fishery) and with little growth potential is another question altogether.

It could be that an Independent Quebec, or even the increasing possibility of one, could propel Canadian Provinces into some kind of territorial reorganization which might enable the construction of an Asymmetrical Federalism to proceed, a Federalism that would more faithfully reflect the regional diversity of Canada than does the present. Consider first the Maritime or Atlantic Region. It has a long history of weak, or failed, efforts at Inter-Provincial co-operation to address economic problems - its physical setting is also very fragmented. There are also strong regional contrasts within Provinces such as New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The prospects for Maritime or Atlantic Union are not particularly promising.

Turning to Western Canada, the most common distinction in popular commentary is that between British Columbia (hereafter BC) and the Prairie Provinces. The latter are a misnomer in functional terms for much of Manitoba and a significant part of Saskatchewan are part of the Canadian shield. This means that their resource base and Provincial economies are very different from the other province, Alberta. One might argue that most people live in the former Prairie areas, now transformed into agricultural and urban uses. But even here there are significant regional differences within the agricultural landscape and ways of life as one traverses the area from the mixed livestock and grain farms of Southern Manitoba to the ranching country in the Albertan foothills. There are also sharp differences in political culture especially between Alberta and the others. Both Manitoba and Saskatchewan have elected Democratic Socialist Governments (some would now say Social Democrat) and are regions that have given strong support to the concept of collective provision. The New Democratic Party and its forerunner, the CCF, have enjoyed only modest voter and little electoral support in Alberta. Any attempt to combine the Prairie Provinces into a new Provincial unit seems fraught with difficulty, given the political cultures and regional differences in terms of way of life.

The differentiation of BC from the rest of the West is based principally on a contrasting resource base, with forest products, minerals and fisheries products being more important; on the dominance of mountainous terrain throughout much of the province; on a coastal climatic regime that makes this Canada's retirement destination, giving rise to such envious terms as Lotusland (no struggle for survival here in the eyes of most Canadians!!); and finally on a political culture that pits a strong socialist tradition, principally but not exclusively based on the coastal region, against other traditions more rooted in entrepreneurialism and individualism within a frontier mentality (although various provincial administrations of different political stripes have been active in exploiting the resource base of the Province). Despite strong contrasts, British Columbians and Albertans have shared in the beliefs of social and political movements that have had less appeal elsewhere in Canada, such as social credit which has governed both provinces in its political form and the current Reform Party, which draws almost all its electoral seats from these two Provinces and which has a direct familial link to social credit through the Manning family, Preston Manning's father having been the Provincial Premier of a Social Credit Government in Alberta for 25 years (1943-1968). Another common element is that BC and Alberta have had, generally speaking, growing economies compared to Saskatchewan and Manitoba and thus their populations have increased substantially from both inter-provincial migration and immigration. In terms of Fiscal Federalism, they are both "have" Provinces, providing revenues for Fiscal redistribution through the Federal Government to other parts of Canada. These Provinces, despite some important inter-provincial and regional contrasts, could be much more attractive claimants for a place in the United States. On the other hand, they would be essential to a reconstituted Canadian Federalism.

The Canadian North, a key part of the mythological Canadian identity - "The true North, strong and free", currently comprises two Governmental units with a third, Nunavut, about to be created out of the present North-West Territories. It would strike many residents as perverse to integrate these into a single provincial unit, a proposal that also would take little account of the regional differences between the Yukon and the other territories.

Lastly, what of Ontario in the heartland of the country? Often seen as both a beneficiary of and a strong supporter of Federalism, as well as the dominator of Canada's several peripheries, Ontario would experience the wrenching apart of the socio-economic and political core of the country if

Quebec were to become independent. This is hardly a happy prospect for a provincial economy that has gone through substantial deindustrialization and job loss in recent years. Much of Ontario's economic prosperity derived from its being the principal location of American investment in manufacturing in Canada, chiefly in Southern Ontario. To the extent that Ontario is a branch plant economy, it is susceptible to withdrawal of investment when it becomes apparent to managers that the Canadian market can be supplied on a more cost-effective basis from American or even Mexican locations. Not all of the job losses in Ontario can be laid at the door of the 1988 Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) for, with the high cost of labour in Southern Ontario, there is an incentive to producers who are locationally committed to the region (in the short run at least) to shed employees and reduce costs in order to remain profitable. Although Ontario itself can be divided into regions with the North-South Division being the most important, the provincial identity is sufficiently strong to remain as a single territorial unit. Whether or not Ontario could join with the Western Provinces to form either a Unitary State or a new Federation without Quebec is an intriguing question, given the history and geography of Western alienation from the core region. But this would be a radically different core, not only in cultural and territorial terms but also in terms of economic power.

Before leaving the regionalization question, it should be noted that the territorial integrity of Quebec is not to be taken for granted as the indigenous peoples of Northern Quebec may attempt to cast their lot with a Federal Canada, provoking what could be a bitter dispute over Northern lands within contemporary Quebec, lands that were added to Quebec by the Dominion of Canada Government from former Hudson's Bay Company lands in 1912. Although lightly-settled, these lands are economically important in terms of water, hydro-electric power and mineral resources to Southern Quebec's population.

### *Identity*

The concept of a nation has much to do with identity, the claims of a people to belong to a larger collectivity and to construct their sense of self as part of that identity. Earlier but now outmoded conceptions of Canada envisaged two founding peoples, the so-called Charter Peoples of English or British and French origins. The social reality of 19th century Canada meant that a Unitary State was out of the question - a Confederation was realistically the only feasible constitutional arrangement. Yet the construction of a united,

single state as a check to expansionist, imperial America was seen as vitally necessary. It was difficult, however, for later generations of English-speaking Canadians to accept that there were two nations within Canada - this was the era of the Nation-state, with the emphasis on the singular. The two nations conception was widely understood and accepted in Quebec and also among French-Canadians living in other parts of Canada. By the 1960s Nationalist sentiment in Quebec was sufficiently strong to engender the "Quiet Revolution", a social and economic transformation intended to realise the goal of being "Masters in our own house".

One act of accommodation by elites in English-Canada was to accept the concept of a bilingual and bicultural Canada as advocated by French-Canadian Federalists; this was not without opposition and resentment amongst the wider population, perhaps greatest in Alberta and BC. But this acknowledgement came too late in the sense that post World War 2 immigration resulted in large numbers of what were not very imaginatively called "New Canadians" living chiefly in Canada's burgeoning metropolitan centres. As with their predecessors from Europe (not including the British Isles), the majority did acquire English as the everyday language in order to survive in North America but there was an explosive growth in "hyphenated" Canadians, demonstrating an increasing ethnic diversity. Those who settled in Quebec developed an ability in French thus helping to sustain the official position of Federal bilingualism. The present official language of the Province of Quebec, French, did not receive this formal designation until as recently as 1974, under a liberal not separatist Government.

Partly for political advantage, thought to derive from associating the Liberal Party of Canada with the growing non-English, non-French ethnic communities, the Federal Liberals introduced the policy of multi-culturalism in 1971. This was a tacit admission that biculturalism was indeed dead. However, while multiculturalism challenged it could not overcome the powerful socio-political duality, that is English-French, which also found expression in the two dominant official languages. The growing strength of French as the official language of public life and the workplace of Quebec, and the increasing use of French by English speaking elites, especially in politics, bureaucracies, education and the media, actually enhanced the bilingual nature of Canada. But there was still not a shared or common Canadian identity. As the idea of French-Canadians was transformed into the idea of Quebecois by Pro-Independent intelligentsia and media supporters, the Provincial Territory became even more important as the political expression of the nation, a Quebecois Nation. This undoubtedly makes it a province

unlike the others, not equal, the geographical domain of a distinct society. Although time does not permit a full treatment, the question of how many nations exist in Canada has been made more complicated by the ascendance of the claims of indigenous or native peoples that they are the first nations. Amongst other things, native organisations although not always in accord have sought to entrench the right of self-government in the Constitution and have aboriginal title and rights recognized. This further requires a reappraisal of identities that have a euro-centric base, be they English or French.

It is often asserted that the Quebecois have a very clear sense of identity, of who they are. They are now believed to have the economic confidence to create a state for their nation. Such an action is, as I argued earlier, an essentially modernist project; there may be other ways to achieve a fuller realisation of the cultural, social and economic aspirations of a nation within Canada than through the construction of a new independent state. In addition, the clarity of this identity is itself under pressure from an increasingly multicultural reality in late 20th century Quebec, especially in its dominant Metropolitan core of Montreal which contains nearly two-thirds of the Provincial population. The vast majority of Quebec's Anglophone minority, historically British in ancestry, reside here. The larger Quebecois Society has permitted or acquiesced in the creation of a parallel set of institutions for this minority which has aided in their constructing a distinct identity - they too are Quebeckers but not Quebecois. This specific expression of Canada's dual identity is being refashioned as Montreal in particular attracts new immigrants from the Caribbean, Francophone Africa and Asia; most other parts of the Province are largely shunned by immigrants. While many of these immigrants are admitted on a French language basis, others either use English or their own language (eg Cantonese) in certain aspects of everyday life even as they are required to use French in formal school and other educational settings and in most workplace contexts. An independent Sovereign Quebec could face a future identity crisis in that the growth of ethnically and, more critically, racially defined populations who are neither "pure Laine" Quebecois nor Quebeckers challenges the basis upon which the identity of a Quebec state is being constructed unproblematically.

The English Canadian element of the duality has commonly been seen to have a weak identity, especially from a Quebec vantage point. Since the early decades of this century, the Britishness of English-speaking Canada has been declining under the demographic pressure of European and, more recently, Asian immigration. Strong regional affinities, strengthened by the

growing significance of Provincial Governments and their bureaucracies in the last four decades further challenge an underdeveloped English-speaking Canadian cultural identity. The English language, a common bond in the Colonial relationship with Britain and now a common bond in the dependent economic relationship with the USA, cannot be a basis for a distinctive cultural identity that would sustain a nationalism. Neither is there a shared ethnicity nor a strong pan-provincial territorial identity to provide a foundation for Canadian nationalism.

This weak sense of nationalism is further eroded by the nature of the economic relationship with the American superpower - Canada is "A Branch-plant Satellite", to use the philosopher George Grant's memorable phrase (Grant, 1965, p.90). This relationship, absolutely critical to the material well-being of so many Canadians, is now being managed under the CUFTA - with NAFTA on the brink of inception. It challenges a national identity as it moves Canadians inexorably toward a hegemonic continental identity as North Americans. The Quebecois can apparently accept the notion that they are North Americans secure in their own regionally distinctive culture. English speaking Canadians have no such recourse and thus will become part of a mass, quintessentially American consumption culture. This, above all, was what Grant feared in his "Lament for a Nation". In his view, Canada had ceased to be a nation (note the singular usage) by the early 1960s. He foresaw increased "Social and economic blending into the Empire", which many would argue has occurred under the Mulroney-led Governments; Brian Mulroney may well be the kind of Continentalist politician that Grant predicted would lead Canada into this greater incorporation. Mulroney of course, given his reading of international economic processes and the evolving global economy, believed that Canada had no other choice. Grant observed that political union would not necessarily occur right away, but it could be precipitated by a major geopolitical event. The withdrawal of Quebec from the Confederation could be precisely such an event, setting off a series of geopolitical events in its train. But this takes us full circle returning to value systems which may prove to be sufficiently distinctive and strongly held as to cause Canadians to resist total incorporation into the United States, there to become part of one indivisible nation with the promise of liberty and justice for all (to paraphrase the Pledge of Allegiance). Just such an incorporation was anticipated by no less than Friedrich Engels over 100 years ago (but then Engels has perhaps proven to be a less than stellar predictor on social matters).

### *Final Remarks*

Any attempt at a conclusion will seem presumptuous, if not foolhardy. Who can tell if the hockey game will be played out according to the strategy of the Independentists. A large body of Federalist sentiment does exist in Quebec. Furthermore, the views and votes of the younger, growing immigrant population, mostly concentrated in Montreal, could very well be crucial. If they are anxious or fear for their own identity and well-being in an ethnically constructed nation-state of Quebec, then they may cleave to a Federal structure which would retain Quebec, an option that will be almost certainly strongly supported by Anglophone Quebecers (even as they acknowledge that they have been well treated in Quebec, certainly in comparison to the general treatment meted out to French-Canadians in other Provinces). In the short run, the struggle between Quebecois Federalists such as the new Prime Minister, Jean Chretien, and Independentists like Lucien Bouchard and Jacques Parizeau will be crucial for the resolution of the Quebec question which is now being framed not so much as "What does Quebec want" as "Will Quebec withdraw from Confederation and under what conditions" - for example, with respect to matters such as Sovereign Territory, the National debt, and currency. At the same time Canadians outside of Quebec must decide if a reconstituted, Asymmetrical Federalism can be devised, a Federalism that can enable Quebecois Federalists to win the hearts and minds of enough Quebecois to reject independence.

If Quebec does leave the Confederation the Quebec question will be settled and the cultural survival of the Quebecois will become the *raison d'être* of the new nation-state, though Independentist leaders could pay a heavy price if economic well-being is not attended to or adversely affected to a high degree. Given such an outcome, then the Canada question will become paramount - "Will (the New) Canada survive?"; the answer is by no means clear; as an optimist, however, I would say "Yes".

### *Postscript*

Canada cannot derail NAFTA by itself. It long ago entered into a free-trade agreement with the United States and has little direct commerce with Mexico. As Orme writes, "NAFTA is ultimately bilateral, a pact between Mexico City and Washington, to which Ottawa, under any Government must reluctantly subscribe". So states David Broder writing in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* (Nov 14 1993) and citing William A. Orme Jr, "Continental Shift: Free Trade and the New North America" (Briefing

Books, 1993). Broder goes on to say that NAFTA's approval would assure a flow of investment to sustain a growth of 6-7 per cent a year. By the time the agreement is fully implemented in 2010, that would make Mexico a trillion dollar economy - almost double that of Canada, our best customer - with American firms having unrestricted access to that purchasing power.

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