

William Watson

A Canadian is ... as a rule too fond by half of contemplating what a Canadian is.

Actually, that's only partly true. I suspect ordinary Canadians spend very little time worrying about being Canadian. They do seem to have a rock-solid conviction that it means not being American, which in turn means not sharing the traits that common Canadian prejudice--the only word for it--ascribes to Americans. In brief, not being American means not being loud, jingoistic, obese, self-confident, undiplomatic, self-centred, almost entirely ignorant of Canada and (an apparent contradiction here) dedicated to making this Canada you are ignorant of even more American, the 51st state in fact. These collected "nots" can be completely inconsistent, of course. Thus our supposed lack of self-confidence coexists with a smug superiority regarding American society and culture, our disgust with jingoism does not stop us from telling all who will listen, and even some who won't, that we are the best country in the world to live in, while our disapproval of American self-centredness exists in spite of our own neurotic obsession with our identity and image. Fortunately, such prejudices are seldom foremost in ordinary Canadians' minds. They do surface at well-defined moments. On Canada Day, for instance. Or in the run-up to any Canada-U.S. hockey final. Or when a tour bus disgorges visiting Americans. Or when we ourselves visit the United States or watch one of Rick Mercer's one-joke comedy specials on talking to Americans. Or, finally, when the United States embarks on an especially unilateralist military or diplomatic adventure. But except on such occasions most ordinary Canadians seem to get on with their lives and let their Canadian-ness take care of itself.

'We should all be so ordinary' is my theme here. Alas, non-ordinary Canadians, by which I mean those in the talking, writing and governing classes, are obsessed--truly, madly, deeply--with the idea of what it is to be Canadian. And they judge their own

actions and the actions they would have us all take collectively by two standards: 1) is it right? and 2) is it sufficiently Canadian?¹

I believe we should ditch the second test and simply judge things by the first. Whether an action is right, not how it will look, or what people will say, is what we want to focus on. John Updike called his 1989 memoir of his youth *Self-consciousness*. Self-consciousness is a key part of what makes us human (so far as we know, at least, no one yet having successfully interviewed a dog). A certain degree of self-consciousness is desirable. Despite what Socrates said, the unexamined life probably is worth living-- almost all life is worth living--, but it surely cannot be as deep or rich as the examined one. We should always be self-aware and critical of what we do. But acute self-consciousness is an adolescent trait and, as in adolescents, leads to awkwardness, posing, hesitation, uncertainty, irresolution, paralysis. Canadian intellectuals paranoid tendency to be always looking over their shoulder, measuring whether they are being sufficiently Canadian or (to call it by its real name) non-American sets up our national life for the distemper that is also characteristic of adolescence.

Take our position on the Kyoto Protocol on global warming. How should we have gone about deciding what to do? We should have estimated the cost in economic slowdown and restructuring, and then weighed that against our sense of the benefit to the world at large and our willingness to sacrifice in the global interest. Would that have left us with a truly distinctive--i.e. non-American--policy position? Maybe, maybe not. We wrote a proud record of selflessness in 1939-45 but in recent decades, by most objective measures (official foreign aid, for instance), we have not been especially altruistic. And, in fact, our economy tilts slightly more toward energy production than the American, while, given the weather here, energy consumption is obviously crucial to us. So it would have been surprising had our position on how large a Kyoto commitment to make been that different from the Americans'. But, of course, to conform with our self-image, it simply had to be. Lucky for us, then, that the U.S. Senate unanimously rejected the

¹ As an economist, I'm bound to think that there is also a third standard: what's in it for me? Granted, the question is seldom posed explicitly, certainly not in public, and not even, I suspect, in the internal monologue that each of us (I extrapolate from my own habits) perpetually conducts.

deal Vice President Al Gore had brought back from Kyoto. As a result, we have had the best of both worlds. We have established our distinctiveness from and moral superiority to the Americans without having to sacrifice too much in terms of energy consumption or production. And, as we all know, a Canadian is ... never happier than when demonstrating his moral superiority to Americans.

Excessive concern for how things look and what others will say is unworthy of a mature, successful country. If we truly are different from the Americans, that difference will out. That we protest our different-ness so much suggests we are not ourselves convinced of it. Do truly distinctive Canadian values really exist? As an English Canadian, I was raised to think part of our uniqueness is pathological deference. As the story goes, a Canadian is ... someone who, if you step on his toe, says “Sorry!” (assuming, of course, the Canadian in question is not Don Cherry). But in *An Elegy for England*, the philosopher Roger Scruton writes that “If an Englishman found himself knocked over by a stranger in the street, or short-changed by a shop assistant, or humiliated by an official, he would at once apologise.” This supposedly fundamental Canadian trait is in fact English! Or *was* English: Scruton uses the past tense because he thinks England, civilized England, is gone now, hounded to death by a deliberate campaign of official brainwashing.²

We have experience of such brainwashing. In our long, arduous search for identity, the British traditions in law, politics and even apology have now been replaced by so-called *Charter* values. The obvious problem with the substitution is that a constitutional charter of rights is a very American thing.³ Indeed, few things are more American. Because it is ultimately inconvenient for a country that above all else prizes its distinctiveness from the United States to adopt as its defining ethical core an American institutional innovation, we have de-emphasized our *Charter*'s focus on individualism

² After the ban on fox-hunting that is part of the campaign, will the phrase “hounded to death” fall into desuetude?

³ The French *Déclaration des droits de l'homme* may be a month older than the U.S. *Bill of Rights*, but, unlike the French, the American version has actually been in effect for 200+ years.

and stressed those parts of it that support collective rights.⁴ They supposedly are the embodiment of truly distinctive Canadian values, such as a love of diversity. But that, too, is a thin reed for uniqueness. Who these days opposes diversity? Even the Americans are acquainted with the idea of collective rights. Were we as knowledgeable of the world as we suppose ourselves to be, we would know that most of our affirmative action laws, like our methods of railway finance 150 years ago, we have learned from them.

The “Canadian values” that we now supposedly cherish are in fact standard Western values. They were born during the Enlightenment in a handful of European countries and--even anti-imperialists should rejoice--have in the last two centuries conquered large parts of the globe. They are not yet hegemonic. They are resisted, sometimes violently, by various strains of fundamentalism. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, however, these ideas have been in the ascendant. They are variously defined and described—democracy, tolerance, pluralism, diversity, forbearance, rule of law. The one name not given them anywhere else but here is “Canadian”.

Another trait that supposedly distinguishes us from the Americans is our reluctance to decide things unilaterally. But what is it exactly that we would decide unilaterally? And would the world care or even notice if we did? Superpowers can decide things unilaterally. If we were a superpower, our reluctance to be unilateral would be admirable. Of course, if we were a superpower, we might not be quite so reluctant to be unilateral. A superpower run by people as convinced as we are of our virtue almost certainly would have messianic tendencies.

Quite apart from its ugliness and hypocrisy, our narcissism is debilitating. It puts us in moral jeopardy when, as occasionally happens, the U.S. does the right thing. Some Canadians took great pride in our decision to allow Saddam Hussein to stay in power.

⁴ As Brian Lee Crowley put it in his 1994 collection, *The Road to Equity*, “Canadians are very individualistic, but to say so is to commit a kind of social solecism; to celebrate that individualism and draw from it guiding principles about how we ought to be governed is to make oneself unfit for polite company.”

Given what turned out to be the high cost of removing him, maybe they were right. But mistrust of the Americans, and reluctance to be seen to be their ally, caused some prominent Canadians, even some in positions of political responsibility, to oppose the *first* Gulf War, which was a slam-dunk ethically: the community of civilized nations obviously has to resist unprovoked aggression. In my own field of economic policy, fear of being too like the Americans has engendered deep mistrust of market processes, and therefore condemned Canadians to a lower standard of living than should have been possible. The cost of such underperformance is not purely private. At the turn of the millennium, U.S. governments spent substantially more per capita on their citizens' health care than Canadian governments did.

In 1961, the Canadian economist Harry Johnson wrote of “a certain immaturity in the Canadian national character, expressed in the unwillingness to accept the fact that Canada is, except from the geographical point of view, a small country. Unlike the citizens of other small countries bordering on large countries, Canadians are not prepared to content themselves with the advantages that can be derived from small size, but set themselves the impossible aspiration of equalling the United States, and still more impossible, of getting the United States to treat them as equals. In the nature of things, such aspirations are doomed to disappointment; and their disappointment almost inevitably curdles into resentment against the United States for its effortless imperviousness to the Canadian challenge...” There was progress in the Mulroney years toward being less self-conscious. The free trade agreement with the United States was a huge step in the direction of psychological adulthood. But, in the last few federal elections, the Liberal Party of Canada, which as of this writing is in the 12th year of its current dynasty, has come to rely for its perpetuation in power on the supposed need for government to project, protect and defend “Canadian values.” That program seems to have found political customers. Maybe the country with its nose pressed up most closely against the window of the world's least self-conscious country cannot help being its most self-conscious. Perhaps in the end a Canadian is ... a person who must be resigned to all this. But I hope not.

Understand, finally, that a Canadian, this Canadian in particular, is ... not self-loathing. Canada is, in many, many ways, a fine place. If our share of exemplary people is not as great as our self-praise implies, it is probably not less than our share of the species' population. But Canada would be such a better place--we would be such a finer people--if we finally out-grew our self-consciousness. In the end, a Canadian is ... the citizen of a country still badly in need of growing up.