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**How Un-Canadian!
Why are we so unwilling to embrace new ideas?**

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I'm glad I live in Canada. I love the sight of the prairies from the air, the access roads making the land into a patchwork quilt. I love the sweetness of Quebec maple syrup, and the winding and seemingly infinite drive along the north shore of Lake Superior. I like being able to safely walk our streets at night. I like knowing that some of my taxes are used to support the less fortunate. I recognize the benefits of our political system in which a strong leader of a majority government can actually get things done. And I cherish my freedom to be critical of the government without being locked up.

Lest you think this entire column will be so gushy about Canada, however, let me state one of my major complaints. There are some disturbing things about the way many Canadians think. What irks me most is their willingness to immediately oppose suggested policy changes that involve a greater role for markets and a reduced role for government. What is worse is that so many of them reject such proposals with a self-righteousness usually accompanied by a statement such as “we don't want to be like the Americans — that's not what Canada is all about”.

There are two reasons to gag next time you hear this kind of self-satisfied response. First, nobody really knows “what Canada is all about” — if, indeed, it is “about” anything. Living in Canada means different things for all of us, and we value the experience in different ways. So “defining” Canada in any way is just silly. For those who persist in this exercise, however, they should at least know that it is probably incorrect to define Canada in terms of its greater tradition of government involvement than that found in the United States. As William Watson's recent book *Globalization and the Meaning of Canadian Life* makes clear, for most of the 20th century, Canada lagged the United States in promoting the role of government.

The second reason for gagging when people rally against a market-based policy reform on the grounds that it is “un-Canadian” is that this criticism is — or should be — irrelevant. Presumably we should care about the best solution to our problems, rather than an unthinking adherence to some nebulous concept of national identity. If markets can be used to solve some of these problems, then let’s consider these proposals seriously.

We have all read about the opposition to Alberta’s recent law that permits private hospitals into its existing public system. Many opponents immediately cite a “two-tiered” health-care system as a natural outcome and the worst of all evils. But the Alberta proposal is only to allow private hospitals to begin providing services that are already provided by the public hospitals, and to use public funds to pay these private hospitals the same fee that the public hospitals would receive for providing the service. This is hardly a two-tiered system. The new policy is based on the belief that private hospitals can operate more efficiently than public hospitals. If there are no efficiency gains, there will be no profits and the idea will not work — at no cost to the taxpayer since the private hospitals are to be built with private money. But if some significant efficiency gains do occur, the private hospitals will be viable and queues in the overall health-care system will be reduced, to the benefit of all current and potential patients. Nobody knows whether Alberta’s new legislation will work, but given the current condition of Canada’s health-care system, it is surely an experiment worth trying. Congratulations to Ralph Klein for demonstrating some all-too-rare political courage.

In the education sphere, some of us at McGill University have been exploring the idea of opening a new wing of the university to offer a wholly tuition-funded liberal arts program based on a completely redesigned and novel curriculum. Though there was some solid support for this idea, I was amazed by some of the vitriolic opposition, both among faculty and students. By far the most common complaint was that a “two-tiered” education system was morally wrong and was against long-standing Canadian principles. It didn’t seem to matter that McGill had been a private university for most of its history. It didn’t seem to matter that McGill and other universities are collapsing under the mandate of providing first-rate education with third-rate financial resources. It didn’t seem to matter that we already have a two-tiered system — with thousands of Canadian students leaving Canada to study at Harvard or Princeton or Stanford — and that keeping some of them in Canada might be desirable for all of us. It also didn’t seem to matter that any profits earned from this private program could be funnelled back to the cash-

starved public university to help both students and faculty alike. All too often the critique went no deeper than “I don’t like it because it’s private”. I had hoped for more open minds in one of Canada’s best universities.

This brings us to two questions. Why do Canadians have this smug anti-American attitude about eschewing markets and promoting government? And what can be done about it? I don’t know the answer to the first question, except to point out what seems obvious. Surely some of Canadians’ attitude comes from the relative sizes of the two countries, the smaller one feeling it necessary to look down on the larger in the hope of making up for its own glaring irrelevance. If anybody out there has a more thorough explanation, feel free to write a letter to the editor.

On the second question, however, I think I have an idea. I’m not a big fan of government subsidies, but here’s one I just might support. Take the hundreds of millions of dollars annually that Canadian governments spend on industrial subsidies and other corporate welfare programs and use the money to subsidize young Canadians who wish to live in the United States for two years. This may sound insane, but it will have one very desirable effect for Canada. Those young Canadians will return with refined views of Canada and how it differs from the United States. They will surely dislike some of what they see in the United States, and that’s fine — like all countries, the United States has lots of problems. But if they retain an open mind they will also come to admire some things about America. These young Canadian travellers may even come to recognize that they are not so different than their American cousins.

Whatever their views upon returning to Canada, they will be based on real experience rather than on an inherited Canadian bias. This might finally put an end to the anti-American, anti-market smugness that so infects public discourse in this country. Maybe then some of the market-based reforms that may solve some of our largest policy problems could be seriously debated.