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Canadian Exceptionalism:
**Are we good,
or are we
lucky?**
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Canadian Exceptionalism: Are we good or are we lucky?

2017 Annual Conference of the
McGill Institute for the Study of Canada (MISC)

February 9 - 10, 2017

Sofitel Hotel
Montreal, Quebec

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Published in 2017 by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada.

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About the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada

Established in 1994 thanks to an innovative agreement between the Bronfman family and McGill University, the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada (MISC) runs an academic program at McGill University, supports an active research environment, and organizes a variety of large-scale, public events on matters of interest to Canadians, including MISC's Annual Conferences, which attract a great deal of attention from policy-makers, media, and the general public. While the Institute itself is non-partisan, MISC is no stranger to debate and controversy.

Canadian exceptionalism: Are we good, or are we lucky?

Conference summary

From February 9 to 10, 2017, the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada (MISC) held its annual conference on the theme of immigration and multiculturalism. Marking Canada's 150th anniversary, the purpose of the conference was to gather scholars, government officials and journalists to take a critical look at Canada's orientation in the world in this historical moment of global realignment.

What follows is a selection of highlights drawn from discussion during the plenaries and keynote speeches. For additional resources and coverage, please consult the [MISC website](#).

Why are we talking about Canadian exceptionalism, and why now?

Around the world, widespread economic insecurity has sparked a retreat from globalism and led to a destabilization of the post-World War II order.

In many Western liberal democratic countries, growing public anger and distrust of institutions have fueled the ascent of far right, anti-establishment, and neo-nationalist parties, stoked a hardening of attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, and a thickening of borders.

In 2016, two major events seemed to capture the zeitgeist of our times: the British vote to exit from the European Union ('Brexit') and the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States.

Against this backdrop, Canada has continued to promote immigration, diversity, and multiculturalism while managing to avoid the kind of populist backlash seen in other Western liberal democratic countries.

It hasn't gone unnoticed. A growing body of scholarly work, international commentary, and analysis – notably in The [Economist](#), The [Guardian](#), [Open Canada](#), and the [New York Times](#) - has given purchase to the idea of **Canadian exceptionalism**.

But the idea of Canadian exceptionalism raises more questions than it answers.

Key questions discussed

- What are the **drivers of the populist backlash** we're seeing in the US and Europe?
- What are the **scope** and **limits** of **Canadian exceptionalism**?
- What are Canadian **attitudes** towards immigrants, authoritarianism, and nativism? How do they impact how we **vote**?

- When it comes to **immigrant integration**, what works and what doesn't?
- How worried should we be about rising populism, and **could it happen here?**

What are the drivers of the populist backlash?

Discussion crystalized around **economic insecurity** and **resentment** as the two main drivers of the populist backlash in the US and Europe.

Growing inequality and precarious employment have led to feelings of vulnerability and a lack of control for many people. This is particularly true for those working in the older economies, a point captured by Bob Rae in his keynote speech: "The pace of globalization and automation," he said, "has created an insecurity that is undeniable."

At the same time, people struggling with the realities of economic insecurity have felt increasingly **ignored, dismissed and ridiculed by their governments, media and intellectual elite.**

In some cases, **economic insecurity** has been compounded by **perceived cultural or security threats**. Terrorist attacks carried out by radical fundamentalists across Europe and the US – some in the name of Islam (Charlie Hebdo and the Bataclan in Paris; Brussels airport; Pulse nightclub in Florida), some in the name of white nationalist ideologies (the murder of MP Jo Cox in England; the Charleston massacre by Dylann Roof in the US; mass murder by Anders Breivik in Norway) - have contributed to a climate of suspicion, xenophobia, and fear in many communities.

Politicians in a number of countries with different electoral systems have been successful in **mobilizing anti-immigrant sentiment for political gain.**

The Trump phenomenon is a good example of all these points. Sarah Kendzior argued that Trump tapped into legitimate grievances, and turned them against immigrants, Mexicans, and Muslims in particular.

When we talk about Canadian exceptionalism, what do we mean?

A number of factors were discussed as characterizing the idea of Canadian exceptionalism:

- Geography
- Permanent managed admission, accessible citizenship, and institutional procedure
- Diversity in immigration
- Pro-immigration and pro-refugee attitudes
- Diversity and multiculturalism as part of national identity
- Political institutions and leadership
- Reasonable accommodation
- Partnerships between government and civil society

What follows is a selection of discussion highlights centered on these themes.

Geography

Canada has never had to contend with massive unplanned migration like many other countries. Our geography and northern climate have made it easier to control our borders, to decide who comes here, how, and when. Canadians may deplore all this talk about building walls, but it's easier to be relaxed about immigration when our only land border is the United States.

“When we celebrate multiculturalism it's a good thing,” said Jeffrey Reitz, “but we should remember that for people in countries where immigration is controversial, it's only because their immigration is different. They want what we take for granted: control over our immigration. And the fact that we have it is really, I think, a matter of good luck.”

Others saw this differently. Geography, argued Joseph Heath, isn't as much of an issue in Canada's luck, but a matter of policy. Most Mexican migrants to the US, for example, entered legally as temporary workers and have overstayed their visas; they're not sneaking across the border.

Luck, in other words, can be managed in better and worse ways.

Permanent managed admission, accessible citizenship, and procedure

Canadian immigration has largely been built on permanent settlement and managed migration. Compared to other countries, citizenship is relatively accessible and encouraged in Canada. This helps give immigrants a sense of inclusion.

Andy Lamey noted that in Europe, for example, there is a “race to the bottom” to make asylum laws stronger. When it comes to refugee policy, Canada upholds the right to asylum and procedural justice. “It is not a certainty that you will be allowed to stay,” he noted, “but your right to procedure is a different matter.”

Diversity and multiculturalism as part of national identity

It's easy to forget how new Canada and its symbolism around diversity and multiculturalism are. As many panelists reminded the audience, immigrants have played a key role in this nation-building project, embracing and promoting the pro-multiculturalism and pro-immigration symbolism we now think of as being uniquely Canadian.

Lamey noted that **national traumas and war often spur constitutional nation-building projects**. In Germany, it was Nazism. In South Africa, it was apartheid. **In Canada, our trauma was the rise of francophone nationalism and the threat of Quebec separatism in the 1960s.**

Canada's multiculturalism policy, adopted by Pierre Trudeau's Liberal government in 1971, was an unexpected byproduct of the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission. In 1963, Lester B. Pearson created the commission in response to the Quiet Revolution in Quebec and his sense that Canada was on the verge of a national-unity crisis being carved out along linguistic lines.

In 1982, official languages and multiculturalism were recognized as core Canadian values in the repatriated Constitution with its entrenched Charter of Rights. In 1988, the multiculturalism policy was transformed into the Multiculturalism Act.

But as Heath reminded us, Pierre Trudeau's brand of nationalism was not popular in the West of the country. Nor, as Allison Harrell, Daniel Weinstock, and Guy Laforest illustrated on their respective panels, has it ever been popular in Quebec, where conversations about immigration and multiculturalism are influenced by French republicanism and the context-specific history of religion, feminism, and nationalism that marked the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s and 70s. **The idea of a singular Canadian national identity is contested in francophone Quebec, and multiculturalism faces more resistance here than in other parts of the country.**

Diversity in immigration and pro-immigration attitudes

Canada's experience with migration is among the most positive of industrialized nations. We've accepted more immigrants on a per capita basis, yet still support immigration more strongly, and are less likely to say we have too many. Why?

Part of this has to do with how immigration is framed in the Canadian context. When we talk about immigration in the US, for example, it's often about what to do with the undocumented population, Mexicans in particular. In present day Europe, we're talking about Muslims. **When we talk about immigration in Canada, we're talking about diverse groups of immigrants.**

Because Canada has a greater degree of control over our immigration system, and is able to pick and choose educated immigrants, **we are more likely to see immigration as an opportunity rather than a problem, and immigrants as an asset rather than a burden.** This impacts the public discourse, particularly when economics are driving the political arguments.

Diversity in immigration also has a positive impact on matters of social integration. As Leslie Seidle noted, no single immigration group constitutes more than 15 percent of the total immigrant population. Immigrants must communicate in the language of the majority – English in most of Canada, French inside of Quebec – and don't all share same language and religion. Thus the tendency to form subgroups is less viable.

Some critics hold that multiculturalism inhibits efforts to integrate newcomers and encourages ghettoization. But as a number of panelists noted – many citing work by Will Kymlicka in the 1990s – Canada with its multiculturalism policy actually scores higher in terms of positive integration outcomes than countries without multiculturalism policies. Data presented by Seidle indicated that up until the 1990s, as immigration was increasing in Canada, resistance to immigration was increasing. By the late 1990s, there was a reversal; increased immigration has not led to resistance, but acceptance.

Reasonable Accommodation

According to Heath, Canadians often find themselves tied up in two discussions. On the one hand, we talk about accommodating groups that want to integrate into our institutions. On the other hand, we talk about accommodating groups who don't want to integrate into institutions and are instead seeking separate, parallel institutions.

Reasonable accommodation is not about marginalization but rather about people participating in our institutions. Many panelists, including Tamara Woroby, Peter Loewen and Ratna Omidvar, spoke about **the importance and successes of immigrant participation into national institutional, education, and political structures in Canada.**

These issues have played out in different kinds of ways in Quebec, as the Honourable Kathleen Weil discussed in her keynote speech and as data presented by Woroby, Seidle, Reitz, and others indicated.

Over the last decade or so, Quebec has seen a waxing and waning of populist, nationalist sentiment. Much of it has been tied to questions around identity and reasonable accommodation of ethno-cultural and religious minority groups, mainly of Muslims, Sikhs and Jews by the historically Catholic French Canadian majority population.

In the 2007 Quebec general election, the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) – a populist, conservative party led by Mario Dumont – campaigned hard on the issue of reasonable accommodation, arguing that accommodations for immigrants and minority groups had gone too far. He pushed the Parti Québécois (PQ) to third place and brought the ADQ to official opposition. One of the spin-offs of this was the establishment of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission (2007-2008) on reasonable accommodation by Jean Charest's minority Liberal government. Still, the ADQ's popularity plummeted after the 2007 election, and they lost official party status in the 2008 election.

In the spring of 2012, a massive student protest movement (dubbed the *Printemps Érablé* or *Maple Spring*) against proposed tuition hikes led the governing Liberals to call an early election. During the campaign, the PQ sought to replicate the ADQ's success in 2007. It campaigned hard against accommodations in the area of religion and language. Under leader Pauline Marois, the party won a minority government and tabled its Charter of Quebec Values. Banking on the popularity of the Charter, the Marois government called an early general election in April of 2014. In the end, the PQ lost and the Liberals were returned to power with a majority.

Partnerships between government and civil society

Canada has established partnerships between government and civil society, including funding to community based organizations and private sponsorship of refugees. The latter can come with problems and corruption – people don't always follow through as sponsors – but it is **a system that helps build trust between immigrants and long term Canadians.**

Irene Bloemraad compared this with the US, where there is no federal integration program; there is no English language training and the only money the federal government gives are for refugees. In Europe, the state does everything, which – as one speaker mentioned – can be very patronizing.

What are the chances of it happening in Canada?

Peter Loewen discussed electoral prospects for an anti-immigration party in Canada. His research – which considered how Canadians feel and how they vote federally in the parliamentary system – suggests **there are systemic constraints and limiting factors in place.**

Different electoral systems provide different incentives, he explained. In Canada, views on migration and trade have long been key elements to party's coalitions and slow to change. The geographic distribution of immigrants likely provides a similar upper limit on the appeal of nativist politics. It also helps that immigrants hold different positions in politics, in all federal parties. The impact? **Immigration is less of a partisan issue, and parties that are pro-trade and pro-immigration are most likely to win the most votes.**

Keep in mind that during the 1990s, Canada's federal political landscape was rocked by the rise of a right-wing, populist, anti-immigration party out of Western Canada: The Reform Party led by Preston Manning. A central pillar of their platform was to repeal multiculturalism. In the end, the Conservatives under Stephen Harper realized that they had to be a diverse party in order to succeed, so there was a quiet internal movement to quash the Reform tendencies with their anti-immigrant impulses.

All of this may help to explain why politicians in many countries are politicizing immigration and scapegoating immigrants while ours – by and large – are not. (Many speakers referred to Conservative leadership candidate Kellie Leitch and her proposal to screen immigrants for “Canadian values” as an exception.) Loewen

concedes that opinions can change, but party positions aren't taken overnight. **He concludes that there doesn't seem to be much potential for a populist, nativist and anti-globalist party in Canada.**

At the same time, a [study](#) commissioned by MISC and presented by Michael Donnelly, **suggests that there is potential for intolerant, anti-immigrant, and anti-refugee sentiment to increase in Canada.** This research found that Canadians were generally satisfied with levels of immigration and that they do have a fair bit of knowledge about Canada's immigration policy. But findings also indicated that Canadian attitudes are not, in fact, exceptionally pro-immigrant or racially enlightened.

So what should Canadians be watching out for?

"Multicultural values mean something, but they do not guarantee success," said Jeffrey Reitz, if we do not pay attention to the economic contribution of immigrants.

Leslie Seidle suggests that in many ways we are doing quite well: when compared to the US, our second-generation education rates are strong, PISA rates are diverse, and naturalization rates of belonging are good. Where we need to improve is in the area of **economic integration and discrimination of immigrants.**

Unemployment rates during the 2008 recession were twice as high among immigrants as natural born Canadians. There are higher unemployment rates, especially for recent immigrants, and enduring problems with the recognition of foreign credentials. Drawing on Seidle's presentation, Bob Rae later emphasized the need to acknowledge the frustration of immigrant communities when they can't work in the areas where they were trained.

Thompson along with Seidle, Donnelly, Rae, and others discussed the problem of discrimination in Canada when it comes to recruitment, hiring, and wages. There is underrepresentation of racial minorities in all levels of government.

Saunders urged us to pay attention to **spatial and economic stratification in Canada, and segregation in many Canadian cities.**

Partly because of how property markets have worked, privileged communities have been more likely to self-segregate and create their own separate enclaves. This leads to a physical separation along social lines. Many immigrants to Canada end up in high-rise suburban slab buildings, areas that lack public transit and access to services; these are also communities where poverty sets in. As a result, Saunders argued, Canada could very well see a right wing party emerge in the current climate; not just made up of disaffected working class white people – as many seem to think – but immigrant populations as well.

In fact, he noted, Canada already did.

In 2010, residents living on the margins of the city elected Rob Ford as Mayor of Toronto. He ran a Trump-like movement – the idea that 'gravy' was going to the elite

inner urban core. He was successful in tapping into the politics of resentment, including the resentment of immigration. Many of his supporters were not white working class people, but people of Caribbean and East Asian backgrounds.

Nativist movements can also appeal to the minority groups and immigrants who are excluded. “Populism isn’t always nativist,” said Debra Thompson, “and nativism isn’t always xenophobic.”

Is Canada really exceptional?

When we talk about Canada being exceptional, compared to what? According to whom and based on what kinds of criteria?

For example, Ratna Omidvar noted the Canadian exceptionalism narrative is both real and somewhat imagined, and tends to be focused on multiculturalism, not other areas like business and innovation. There’s also a misconception about Canada being a multicultural country; we have failed, she argues, to drive immigration to small and medium sized cities. We have a multicultural urban Canada, and we have the rest of Canada.

What parts of our history and present does the narrative paper over?

Various examples were raised in all panels and included the residential school system, the SS Komagata Maru, wartime Japanese internment, and the *None is too many* policy toward Jewish refugees during the Holocaust years.

And yet, as Nahlah Ayed wondered, despite the evidence that we are not exceptional, the image persists. Why?

Scott Gilmore suggested that the image of Canadian exceptionalism persists in certain bubbles: “Like here in the Sofitel, among the people in this room. We are also the people who project the brand.” When we say Canada is exceptional, he wondered, exceptional in relation to what? Afghanistan or the US? In that case, yes. **But exceptionalism in Canada – whatever that means – is not equal.** “Why is it,” Gilmore asked, “that we are not talking about the unexceptional parts of Canada with the intensity, anger and passion that [they] deserve?” Indigenous Canadians have higher unemployment, suicide, life expectancy, and incarceration rates than other Canadians.

Finally, many panelists grappled with squaring the tragic events in Quebec City with the tidy narrative of Canadian exceptionalism.

On Jan. 29, 2017 – just days before the MISC Conference took place – six Muslim men were killed and nineteen others were injured in a terrorist attack on a mosque in suburban Quebec City.

The suspected gunman is 27-year-old Alexandre Bissonnette, a white man believed to hold far right, anti-Muslim, and nationalist views.

Key take-away messages from the conference:

- **Yes, Canada has been lucky.** By dint of geographic and political circumstance, Canada has not been susceptible to the kinds of large-scale, unregulated migrant flows experienced by other countries.
- **Recognizing luck doesn't mean we shouldn't recognize our institutions, procedures, and the role they play.** In comparing the US and Europe to Canada, many panelists highlighted Canada's ability and successes in integrating immigrants into our political institutions and civil society.
- **Don't be complacent.** The wave of right-wing populism that has rocked the US and Europe took many so-called 'elites' – government, media and intellectuals – by surprise. It shouldn't have. In Canada, there is no evidence to suggest that our diversity or our institutions will inoculate us from larger global forces driving populism and nativism in other liberal democracies.
- Canada must stay attuned to patterns and politics of **economic insecurity** and **resentment, including among immigrant and minority populations.**
- **Yes, Canada has been good... at times. But not always.** We have glaring examples of discriminatory immigration policy and practice, and a devastating record on indigenous rights rooted in a history of colonialism and conquest.
- There is **no evidence to suggest that Canadians would be any more empathetic or less reactionary** than Americans or Europeans if we had massive numbers of migrants arriving at our borders seeking asylum, or undocumented workers living in the country.

Conference panels and presentations

FEBRUARY 9, 2017

Words of Welcome

Andrew Potter, Director McGill Institute for the Study of Canada | Michael Goldbloom, co-chair, McGill Board of Trustees

What Canadians feel, think, know, and think they know about Immigration?

Moderated by Jonathan Montpetit, Journalist, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

Panelists: Michael Donnelly, Assistant Professor, School of Public Policy and Governance, University of Toronto | Allison Harell, Professor of Political Science at UQAM and UQAM Research Chair in the Political Psychology of Social Solidarity | Peter Loewen, Director of the School of Public Policy and Governance and Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto

Special address

The Honourable Michelle Rempel, Member of Parliament

Keynote address

The Honourable Kathleen Weil, Minister of Immigration, Diversity and Inclusiveness

Introduced by Alex K. Paterson, Founding Co-Chair, Board of Trustees, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada; and Chairman, Foundation of Greater Montreal (2005-2009)

FEBRUARY 10, 2017

Words of Welcome

Andrew Potter, Director McGill Institute for the Study of Canada | Antonia Maioni, Professor, Department of Political Science and Dean of Arts, McGill University

The Theory of Canadian Exceptionalism: An exploration of the theory, and its scope and limits

Moderated by John Geddes, Ottawa Bureau Chief, Maclean's Magazine

Panelists: Irene Bloemraad, Professor of Sociology and Thomas Garden Barnes Chair of Canadian Studies, University of California at Berkeley | Joseph Heath, Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto | Andy Lamey, Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of California San Diego

Integrating Immigrants: A comparative look at what works and what doesn't

Moderated by Elsbeth Heaman, Professor, Department of History, McGill University

Panelists: Tamara Woroby, Senior Adjunct Professor of Canadian Studies, Johns Hopkins University and Professor of Economics, Towson University (University of Maryland System) | Leslie Seidle, Research Director, Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) | Jeffrey Reitz, Director, Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies, University of Toronto

The Nativist Turn: How worried should we be about rising populism?

Moderated by Mark Sutcliffe, Broadcaster at 1310 News and Columnist at Ottawa Citizen

Panelists: Sarah Kendzior, Columnist, The Globe and Mail | Debra Thompson, Professor, Department of African American Studies, Northwestern University | Doug Saunders, Columnist, The Globe and Mail

As Canadian as Possible under the Circumstances

Bob Rae, Senior Partner, Olthuis Kleer Townshend LPP, and Professor, University of Toronto

Introduced by Suzanne Fortier, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, McGill University

Lucky, Good and the Future

Moderated by Nahlah Ayed, Foreign Correspondent, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

Panelists: Ratna Omidvar, Senator, Senate of Canada | Daniel Weinstock, Professor, Department of Law, McGill University | Guy Laforest, Professor of Political Science at Université Laval | Scott Gilmore, International Affairs Columnist, Maclean's Magazine; Founder, Building Markets