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As Canadian... as Possible

Abstract

The article considers the multifaceted Canadian identity, the fuzzy and elusive concept of the English Canadian as compared to the "distinct society" of the French Canadian. Is English Canada just a geographic notion with a vague cultural definition? Is it merely a reflection of the negative aspects of the United States? The search for the Canadian identity is discussed against the backdrop of the extraordinary impact the now emblematic "I am Canadian" TV commercial had on the reinforcement of the defining characteristics of Anglophone Canada and the nation-wide discussions at political and institutional levels that it started.

Résumé

Cet article étudie l'identité canadienne à visages multiples ainsi que le concept flou et insaisissable du Canada anglophone comparé à la "société distincte" du Canada francophone. Le Canada anglophone, n'est-il juste une notion géographique doté d'une vague définition culturelle ? Est-ce simplement un reflet des aspects négatifs des Etats-Unis ? La recherche de l'identité canadienne est présentée sur l'arrière-plan de l'impact, maintenant emblématique, de la publicité télévisuelle "Je suis Canadien". Cette publicité a renforcé la définition des caractéristiques des canadiens anglophones et elle a subitement suscité un vif débat politique et institutionnel.

The Canadian identity is a concept that has been hard to define coherently and lucidly. For a number of years it was mainly characterized by British influences, expressed in the Canadian aspiration to preserve British institutions, customs and traditions. At the time of the creation of Canada, most English-speaking settlers believed themselves to be British subjects. Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister remained true to his declaration, "A British subject I was born; a British subject I will die." His vision of Canada was loyalty to the Empire and independence from the United States. As a counterpoint, from the very start, French-speaking settlers desired a country that would not rely so much on Britain politically and economically and were therefore more willing to proclaim their Canadianness and call themselves Canadiens.

The British facet of the Canadian identity began to be felt less and less pronounced through time: with the disintegration of the British Empire, the Dominion of Canada was compelled to establish closer relations with the United States. The 1931 Statute of Westminster constituted the legislative sovereignty of the self-governing dominions of the British Empire and Canada achieved full political independence. The struggle for defining Canadian identity became more intense.

Some analysts claim that the search for this new national identity has moved away from the British heritage and has focused more on the acceptance of the lifestyles and traditions of the immigrants that have been coming to the country in the past several decades. They consider that Canada is defined by its multiculturalism and imply that therefore there is no Canadian identity and culture as such.

Francophone Quebec has made numerous appeals for the rest of Canada to recognize its distinct society status. In the 1960s there was a revival of the French language and French culture in Quebec, leading to a reawakening of nationalism in the province. This process achieved international publicity during the 1967 visit of French President Charles de Gaulle and his controversial speech on July 24, 1967 when he declared "Vive le Quebec libre!" from the balcony of Montreal's city hall. Independence referendums in Quebec were defeated in 1980 and 1995, but efforts by separatists to make their province a sovereign state still persist to this day. Whether Quebec will be acknowledged as a distinct society remains to be seen, but there is no doubt in any Canadian's mind that the "Quebecois" or French Canadian is an identity much less fuzzy and more readily and effortlessly definable than that of the English Canadian. With its distinct language and traditions Quebec seems to be one distinguishing characteristic of Canada's identity. But whereas many Canadians welcome Quebec's peculiar customs, some consider the province remote and alien because of its constant endeavours for secession from Canada. Quebec separatists now prefer to call themselves Québécois and not Canadian.

English Canada is viewed by some merely as a geographical concept with a vague cultural definition. At most, it is considered as a reflection of the negative features of the United States, absorbing American tasteless pop culture, demonstrating an increased disposition to engage in lawsuits (especially after the 1984 Charter of Rights and Freedoms, cf. Coe 1988) or adopting hyper political correctness.

The search for Canadian identity has been expressed through the now famous quotes:

There are two miracles in Canadian history. The first is the survival of French Canada, and the second is the survival of Canada.

Frank R. Scott (1952), jurist and poet

Canadians are an ambivalent lot: One minute they're peacekeepers next minute they punch the hell out of each other on the ice rink.

Ken Wiwa (2003), human rights activist and author

The great themes of Canadian history are as follows: Keeping the Americans out, keeping the French in, and trying to get the Natives to somehow disappear.

Will Ferguson (2005), award-winning author whose work is published in more than thirty countries

In the 1970s a radio show on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) held a contest whose goal was (in the manner of "As American as apple pie") to compose the conclusion to the phrase: "As Canadian as ...". The winning entry read: "As Canadian as... possible, under the circumstances." (Atwood 1996).

Against this background, in 2000 the Canadian beer company Molson (Canada's largest brewer with a 45% share of the beer market) created a commercial for its Molson Canadian brand called "I am Canadian" that became to be known as "The Rant". The commercial depicts Joe, a flannel-shirted average Canadian, who feels anything but American, in a movie theatre with a screen that shows different Canadian symbols behind him. Joe gives a speech about what is a Canadian, starting with a fairly quiet, tentative and apologetic tone, then rising to a crescendo and finally shouting the last two lines in a fit of nationalistic pique at which point the audience goes wild. And then the rant ends with the polite, gentle and stereotypical Canadian "Thank you". Here is the text of this 60-second commercial:

Hey.

I'm not a lumberjack,
or a fur trader...
and I don't live in an igloo
or eat blubber, or own a dogsled...
and I don't know Jimmy, Sally or Suzy from Canada,
although I'm certain they're really, really nice.

I have a Prime Minister,
not a President.
I speak English and French,
NOT American.
and I pronouce it ABOUT,
NOT A BOOT.

I can proudly sew my country's flag on my backpack.
I believe in peace keeping, NOT policing.
DIVERSITY, NOT assimilation,
AND THAT THE BEAVER IS A TRULY PROUD AND NOBLE
ANIMAL.
A TOQUE IS A HAT,
A CHESTERFIELD IS A COUCH,
AND IT IS PRONOUCED "ZED" NOT "ZEE", "ZED"!

CANADA IS THE SECOND LARGEST LANDMASS!
THE FIRST NATION OF HOCKEY!
AND THE BEST PART OF NORTH AMERICA!

MY NAME IS JOE!
AND I AM CANADIAN!

Thank you.

It seems the average Canadian can truly relate to Joe. Any Canadian who has traveled abroad can identify with the mockery of the words: *I don't live in an igloo, eat blubber, or own a dogsled*. They are also aware that a Canadian flag on your backpack signifies respect since Canadians are considered to be polite and agreeable. It was a Canadian, Prime Minister Lester Pearson, who first proposed a UN mission of the type that we have come to know as peacekeeping. The Canadian immigration model is indeed *diversity, not assimilation*: America's "melting pot" or unity out of diversity (*e pluribus unum*) and Canada's mosaic: "multiculturalism within a bilingual framework".

The commercial has become one of the emblems of the Canadian identity, turning into a kind of pledge of allegiance. What the ad is saying is what Canadians wish people would do - scream that they are proud to be Canadian. It is an expression of the effort on the part of Canadians to distinguish their culture from that of the United States and to make fun of their neighbours to the south. It is also designed to accommodate the annoyance Canadians feel because they are neglected and misjudged by Americans. "The Rant" also reflects to a great extent the Canadian propensity to self-irony with the salute to diffidence with the quiet apology at the end of the ad and the mockery of glorifying the beaver.

When it was first shown on TV it became an instant hit. The actor, who played Joe, the Nova Scotia native Jeff Douglas, was declared a "national treasure" by the *National Post*. He performed the commercial live at hockey games and other events bringing the roaring audience to their feet. "The Rant" has been performed and watched a multitude of times across Canada. It is seen as a strong Canadian statement which may have brought about a sort of jingoistic fervour one manifestation of which was the introduction of the Canadian national anthem "O Canada" as a requirement for school kids. Although there is no federal legislation which stipulates the mandatory singing of the anthem, provincial legislatures have introduced such acts. A few examples: the Saskatoon school board implemented this policy in 2000-01 academic year (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/wha/8311.htm>), the Calgary Board of Education introduced Administrative Regulation 3074 - Flag and Anthem making the playing and singing of "O Canada" mandatory at the commencement of major school assemblies and ceremonies (<http://www.cbe.ab.ca/Policies/policies/AR3074.pdf>), Ontario's Education Act requires that students in all Ontario schools sing Canada's national anthem as part of their daily opening or closing exercises (<http://www.enseignerontario.ca/en/ontarioclassrooms.htm>), and British Columbia Reg. 485/2004, November 1, 2004 ensures that the Canadian national anthem is sung at each school assembly.

In fact, it might be taken as an example of what Canadians have been preaching against - as being aggressively nationalistic, a trait considered typical south of the border. Canadians are not used to such patriotic displays (cf. Losier and Porton 2004:21). For a long time surveys and analyses showed Canadians growing more

apathetic and indifferent towards their nation (cf. Baker and Jedwab 2003 for a poll on declining Canadian patriotism) but after this ad aired it was frequently played in movie theatres and audiences would applaud loudly and were able to repeat all the words. Crowds at baseball games, hockey games and theatres joined in, manifesting their Canadianness much more garishly and chanting more loudly than their neighbours singing the national anthem. This type of patriotic fervour is usually reserved for world hockey games!

Molson vice-president Brett Marchand has said that the impact of the commercial beyond its value as a beer ad was absolutely unexpected. The then Minister of Health was quoted as saying: "In this country a toque is a hat, it is pronounced zed not zee, and health care is public, not private." (Manning 2000).

The commercial's primary target was the 19-to-25 male age group, but it has appeal for all ages. Quite deliberately Molson did not make a French language version of the Joe Canadian commercial and it was never shown on Quebec TV. *Ce n'est pas Joe le Canadien*.

The other Molson "I Am Canadian" ads reinforced many of what Canadians consider to be the defining characteristics of their nation simultaneously invoking patriotism. The tirade about American stereotypes of Canadians is taken up in other Molson Canadian commercials where at the expense of Americans Canadians feel superior and proud: an American in a bar, after having derisively asked a Canadian where his pet beaver is, is mauled by the animal. Another commercial shows two American girls who claim that Canadians are polite and passive against the background of scenes of hockey tussle and weight-lifting. At a party, an American girl asks a Canadian: So you're from Canada! Do you know Glen....he works in an office....plays hockey... And in another ad an American hockey player pretends to be ill so as not to play against the mighty Canadian team.

The point at issue is: are these manifestations of anti-Americanism or anti-American stereotyping? Does it express some kind of national lack of confidence, insecurity and a hazy idea of national identity? Some critics insist that this commercial is indicative of the ways Canadians try to define themselves – by stating what they are **not** more than focusing on what they **are**. The loud and negative statement of "We are not Americans" is a reproach on American insolence, love of guns, "policing".

The American stereotype about Canada, according to Bennet (2003), is that it is supposed to be a cold, wholesome country of polite, beer-drinking hockey players, quietly assembled by loyalists and royalists more interested in order and good government than liberty and independence. But then she asks: if Canadians are so reserved and moderate, why are they so progressive about letting people do what they want to, referring to several facts from Canadian life: doctors are allowed to dispense medical marijuana, they don't have the death penalty but crime has been declining, same-sex marriages are recognized, 19-year-olds are allowed to drink, more immigrants per capita are accepted compared to the United States. Does that mean that Canadians are more adult and more secure?

Apart from its enormous commercial success, "The Rant" jump started nationwide discussions at the political and institutional levels. Several academics articulated their concerns about the negativity of the message, considering the

commercial pathetic, depressing and an embarrassment to Canada, an expression of nationalism without content. Its critics held it to be an anti-American statement. Its supporters saw it as a demonstration of Canadian pride:

This speaks to every stupid question that Americans always ask Canadians. There is a very strong element of nationalism in Canada that never goes away. The closer we get economically, the more we like thumbing our noses and that's a lot of fun.

Bob Rae, former premier of Ontario (cited in MacGregor 2003:280)

Quebec politicians reacted to the ad by claiming that their real fear is not comparison with the Americans, but assimilation with the Canadians. The author of the ad, Glen Hunt, designed it as pro-Canadian and not anti-American. Marchand also stated that the ad elements – beer, hockey and the environment – represented “Canada’s patriotic DNA” (MacGregor 2003:281).

The success of “I am Canadian” gave rise to many other different ethnic parodies: I am Italian, I am Pakistani, I am American, I am Chinese, I am Greek, I am Albertan, I is Newfie (<http://www.indefual.net/canada/jokes/rant-cnd.html>). The best known of these was Toronto radio station Edge 102’s “I Am Not Canadian” (<http://explanation-guide.info/meaning/I-Am-Not-Canadian.html>), showing a Quebec separatist – Guy, a man from Quebec – who babbles against English Canada’s stereotypes, while simultaneously embodying them. The Joe Canadian rant has been acknowledged by the marketing business as one of the most original ads in recent years.

A recent article in the Canadian newspaper the *Globe and Mail* made once again reference to “The Rant”: “Think of us as America Lite. America with half the calories – but more alcohol. Wide-open spaces. Big cars. But gun control, too. And public health care.” (Stanford 2004). The article ends with the words: “I am. Complex. I am. Contradictory. I am. Confused.”

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Molson is planning on filming Part Two of “I am Canadian”. The only problem is that Jeff Douglas has moved to the United States, like other Canadian actors – William Shatner, Michael J. Fox, Jim Carrey. Critics have dubbed “The Rant” “I was Canadian” and “I am Canadian – Until My Big Break Comes”, declaring that Jeff’s action would reduce “Joe” to apoplexy. Back in 2001 when the actor decided to leave, the *National Post* launched a job search in order to keep “Joe” in Canada. This, in turn, led to concerns voiced in connection with the brain drain which has become so widespread. According to the figures by the Statistical Yearbook, United States Immigration and Naturalization Services 2004 and Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004, the number of Canadian immigrants to the U.S.A. varies between 17,000 and 31,000. Not only that, but they are better educated and have higher incomes than the population as a whole.

Although the Canadian icon “Joe” – Jeff Douglas – has gone to Hollywood, and Molson Inc. and American beer leader Coors have announced they will merge (2004) to create the fifth largest brewer in the world, Molson and the “I am Canadian” commercial will remain as Canadian as there is. Or perhaps the only

national symbol of Canadian unity will remain hockey. After all, Canada is known for its beer, cold weather and hockey, isn't it?

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