

***Canada's Social Contract: Evidence
from Public Opinion***

Matthew Mendelsohn

Executive Summary

**Discussion Paper P|01 – Public Involvement Network
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Canada's Social Contract: Evidence from Public Opinion

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Executive Summary

What is the nature of the Canadian identity at the beginning of the 21st century and its relationship to the Canadian social contract? The traditional picture portrays Canada as more collectivist, more open to diversity, and more internationalist than its southern neighbour. But the 1990s witnessed a retrenchment of state activity as governments faced the pressures of deficit reduction, trade liberalization, and a neo-conservative attack on social spending and levels of taxation. A new portrait of the Canadian identity emerged, one that was more individualistic, less willing to redistribute resources through the state, more open to private sector solutions to economic challenges, and less concerned with the preservation of traditional sources of Canadian culture. In what respects are these portraits accurate?

The paper provides a detailed synthesis of the last ten years of Canadian public opinion data on what Canadians think about the social contract. The paper explores how Canadians are reconciling pressures for competitiveness, innovation, efficiency, and globalization, with the traditional view of a sharing and caring Canadian identity.

Specific topics include Canadians' views on: their rights and responsibilities as citizens; the character of inter-group and inter-community relationships; the roles of private enterprises and public institutions in the economy; the obligations of Canadian governments to their citizens; and the appropriate nature of the trade-offs between individual, market-based values and the collective provision of public goods.

The author conducted a search of all available commercial surveys on these issues available through public archives (such as the Canadian Opinion Research Archive at Queen's University), major academic surveys (such as the Canadian Election Studies), research institute surveys (such as those conducted by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada), and government surveys made public through the *Access to Information Act* and available at the Parliamentary Library. Survey results are organized thematically to facilitate analysis by the author.

Key Conclusions

Canadians have become more attached to their country over the past two decades, more likely to describe themselves as "Canadian first," and less likely to feel a primary identification with their province. These trends are even stronger amongst those under the age of 35 (except in Quebec, where it is older Canadians who have the most attachment to Canada).

Most Canadians have embraced the identity laid out for them in the Charter of Rights. There is strong support for bilingualism and multiculturalism, and these have become cornerstones of the Canadian identity across the country.

Canadians have also become more supportive of immigration, with only about one Canadian in three calling for a decrease in the number of immigrants coming to Canada, although this number shifts with changes in economic and political conditions.

The path embarked upon over thirty years ago – to entrench in Canadians a sense of themselves as a bilingual, multicultural country – has largely been a success, with younger Canadians being the most supportive of bilingualism, multiculturalism, and immigration. There is also evidence that young people are much more accepting of non-traditional family relationships.

There is, however, less support for Aboriginal peoples. Canadians are ambivalent on questions related to Aboriginal peoples: they recognize that there are treaty obligations and acknowledge a legacy of discrimination, but they tend to resist the idea of “special status,” believe that Aboriginal peoples are asking for too much, and believe that they need to more readily accept the realities of 21st century Canadian life.

Support for the equalization programme remains high across the country, even in the “have provinces.” Canadians overwhelmingly believe that people in small town Newfoundland should have access to schools and hospitals of comparable quality to those in suburban Toronto. Yet inter-regional tensions and jealousies also remain high. Canadians (outside Ontario) feel that their province does not get its fair share out of Canadian federalism, does not have sufficient power within the federation, and is not respected by the federal government.

The turnaround in attitudes toward trade liberalization and an active trade agenda since the 1980s is remarkable. In the aftermath of the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, opinion on liberalization and on the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was very hostile. Since the nadir of support in 1992, support for NAFTA and other trade agreements has steadily climbed, and support for the continued negotiation of new trade agreements continues to be high. Although some well-educated young people oppose trade liberalization, and the socially marginal are likewise hostile, a strong majority of young Canadians look to trade liberalization as an opportunity that they are excited to face. Canadians have come to believe that their country is more productive than it once was. They see no contradiction between competitiveness and productivity on the one hand, and a strong network of social programs on the other. Most Canadians think that strong social programs add to our productivity.

Canadians are even more comfortable with global integration on a variety of issues, favouring an expansion of the role of international institutions. However, they also believe that decisions in regard to social spending and the welfare state must remain in domestic hands. While support for trade liberalization has become axiomatic, this support is tempered by concerns about damage to social conditions. The support for trade

liberalization is a manifestation of internationalism, not a manifestation of support for neo-conservative values. Canadians embrace the image of the country as a globalizing society, and one doing good in the world.

The evidence that Canadians are internationalist is overwhelming. Several strands of internationalism have now been incorporated into Canadians' identity: they believe Canada has a moral obligation to the world, they would like to encourage the adoption of Canadian values abroad, and they believe these can be furthered by trade and engagement with the world. Canadians are more engaged with the world than ever before, and see this engagement as key to prosperity.

Canadians recognize that they are highly trade dependent on the US, but the majority does not believe that we should have closer relations with the US on most issues. There has not been any noticeable increase in self-identification as "North American" amongst Canadians. Canadians distinguish between our relationship with the US and our identity: while most Canadians want the relationship nourished and recognize its importance for our collective prosperity, they do not want Canada to become more like the US and do not want Canada to lose its distinct identity. A strong majority of Canadians believe we are different from Americans, and think we have more in common with Canadians from other provinces than with those Americans in nearby states.

There is some evidence of greater support for continentalism than before - inasmuch as Canadians are prepared to work with Americans when it is in the interests of both countries and where the policies are "managerial" in nature (border security, for example) and do not touch directly the question of how we organize ourselves as a community. Canadians want to maintain a close relationship with the US, without becoming American or sacrificing our ability to make independent decisions.

Canadians' top priorities tend to be social ones, such as health care, education, unemployment, and child poverty. When asked directly, Canadians are more likely to say that "more generous social programs" should be a high priority than ensuring that the government "interferes as little as possible with the free market." Most think we should reinvest in social programmes ahead of cutting taxes. However, while Canadians have deep commitments to the social programs of the Canadian social contract, there is less commitment to "government" or "the state" in their value structure. One should not misinterpret support for health care and education as support for "statist" solutions.

While Canadians continue to manifest a spirit of social solidarity and commitment to strong social spending and programmes, most have embraced (or accepted) what they consider to be the realities of an open and global economy. Trade, knowledge, education, fiscal restraint, and strategic investment are crucial for prosperity, and governments can help create opportunities but cannot "create jobs." Therefore, support for traditional job creation programmes has gone down, while support for "strategic investments" that can help Canadians make the most of their own opportunities has gone up.

Maintenance of a balanced budget has become a Canadian value, and there is great resistance to violating this. Despite the political focus on deficit reduction, and the public's support for political parties that focused on fiscal issues, the Canadian public's values did not seem to evolve much on the key issue of whether it was the state's job to provide key public services, and whether individuals were willing to pay for them. Canadians' commitment to a strong system of public education, health care, and environmental protection remained unwavering through the 1990s. The Canadian public recognized that fiscal issues needed attention, without accepting holus bolus the neo-conservative argument that there needed to be a significant retrenchment of social spending.

In summary, Canadians have moved away from the traditional left on fiscal and economic issues through their embrace of trade liberalization and fiscal conservatism, without sacrificing their commitment to social programmes. On the other hand, on social and moral issues, Canadians have adopted positions associated with the left and are increasingly accepting of less traditional family structures and lifestyles, with the exception of many older Canadians who are less comfortable with this.