

# We do have distinctive values

**W**e devote an inordinate amount of brainpower, in this country, to trying to define what makes us different from Americans. Our neighbours to the south rarely give it a thought.

But one of the most prominent social scientists in the United States has spent some time recently pondering the question. His conclusion: Canadians do have a distinct set of values.

Daniel Yankelovich is considered by many to be the founding father of public opinion research in America. He has probed his country's psyche for more than 40 years. He has written 10 books. He has founded a string of companies, from Boston to La Jolla, to track social trends, promote public dialogue and revitalize democracy.

For the last six months, the 78-year-old social theorist has worked as an adviser to a Canadian think tank that sought to pull together a citizens' vision for the nation.

The project was conceived by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) of Ottawa and managed by Viewpoint Learning of California, one of the Yankelovich's companies.

It consisted of 10 day-long dialogues in centres from Halifax to Vancouver last fall. More than 400 Canadians took part.

As the participants worked their way through a series of trade-offs - between competitiveness and equity; tradition and tolerance; market discipline and social cohesiveness - their comments were videotaped, then submitted to computer analysis.

What emerged was a set of core values shared by citizens across the country:

★ Canadians wanted a nation in which markets contributed to personal and community well-being, but governments bore ultimate responsibility for health care, safety and the environment.

★ They wanted government programs that equipped Canadians to participate in the workforce, but expected individuals to strive for self-sufficiency.



Carol Goar

★ They wanted a culture that remained open to newcomers, but required immigrants to accept basic Canadian norms such as gender equality.

★ They wanted proof that their tax dollars were being used effectively.

★ And they felt a sense of community that transcended race, geography, politics or background.

Yankelovich studied these findings and compared them to his work on American values, preferences and priorities.

He found many similarities. Citizens of both countries were highly pluralistic, committed to the work ethic, cynical about both government and business, convinced that education was the key to social mobility and proud of their nationality.

But he identified four significant differences.

1.) Whereas Americans saw their government as a watchdog over the marketplace, Canadians expected their government to act as both a partner to the private sector and a protector of citizens.

Citizens of the U.S. looked to Washington to enforce the law and catch cheaters.

Their Canadian counterparts wanted Ottawa to collaborate with private sector to achieve economic progress, but to step in to do what the market could not - or would not - do.

2.) Americans had a much greater tolerance for inequality than Canadians.

Yankelovich described American individualism as "an assertive, competitive, my-needs-come first variety." Canadian individualism, he said, was "tempered by a sense of community"

and an unease with vast disparities in wealth and living conditions.

3.) The two nations had different concepts of morality.

In the U.S., citizens drew a clear line between right and wrong, legal and illegal. They favoured punitive responses to those who crossed that line. Canadians, by contrast, operated by a set of shared norms and social pressure.

4.) Canadians had a much deeper sense of global interdependence than Americans.

As citizens of a middle power, Canadians were instinctive bridge builders and team players. Americans, Yankelovich said, "feel that their power buys them independence from world opinion."

These are subtler than the distinctions that commentators have drawn in the past.

Yankelovich did not, for example, describe America as a melting pot and a Canada as a cultural mosaic. Nor did he resort to such stereotypes as the polite, self-deprecating Canadian or the brash, hard-driving American.

But he did conclude that the 49th parallel is more than an artificial line of demarcation. It separates two peoples who look more alike than they really are.

Yankelovich's analysis pleased his partners at Canadian Policy Research Networks.

It allowed them to affirm that "there is a set of distinctly Canadian values, shared by citizens from coast to coast, that differentiates us from our neighbours.

"This is a source of pride and a basis for building a distinctive community in the future," the think tank said.

But having the building blocks is not enough. It is how our leaders use them that will determine whether Canada lives up to its potential.

It is reassuring to know that we have national values. It would be better to have a plan to put them in action.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.