

# **What Do Canadians Want in North America: Coming of Age in Canada**

**By**

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## **What Do Canadians Want in North America: Coming of Age in Canada**

Discussion so far in this conference has focussed on trade and other economic issues. In these two aspects of life, Canada and the United States are integrating. In contrast, we are talking in this session about socio-political issues, where the two countries are diverging.

How can we converge and diverge at the same time? This is a fascinating situation, and I want to begin by reflecting briefly on the economic integration.

### **The Economic Context**

We have come a long way since the 1980s, when Canadians were lamenting, yet again, the dreadful state of our competitiveness. As a people, we were nervous about free trade. We had a vigorous national debate on this and decided to go forward.

As trade barriers fell, business on both sides of the border reorganized to take advantage of the new market access. That was a momentous change. But there were many other forces of change in the 90s:

- The U.S. economy embarked on a raging industrial boom. For about eight years, it was the most vibrant growth economy on the planet. In other words, it was a magnet for imports. Canadian firms profited from that boom. More recently, they have experienced a slowdown due to a much more sluggish U.S. economy.
- During the 1990s, Canadian domestic policy focused on getting the economic house in order. Public sector deficits were dramatically reduced and inflation was contained, at the price of weak economic growth and depressed incomes.
- Meanwhile, more than half the population adopted the Internet as their daily tool for communicating with the rest of the world.
- Immigration flows from Asia and the Middle East set new records, and
- Canadian women decided to have even fewer babies.

This is a phenomenal amount of change, compressed into one decade (plus a bit). And I think it shows that Canadians are a remarkably resilient people. Overall, I would say that industrial Canada is coming of age as a North American economy. And Canadians have adapted rather well.

### **The New Social Canada**

But social Canada is also coming of age, and in this case the two countries are diverging – some key social and political values in Canada are crystallizing in a direction which is different from that of the United States. There is a new confidence about who we are as Canadians, and we are distinctive.

This is demonstrated in our recent *Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future*, and in the polling evidence analyzed by Matthew Mendelsohn, Michael Adams and Frank Graves (each using his own data).

Here are some of the findings from the CPRN Dialogue with randomly selected Canadians:

- People are much more comfortable about participating in a market economy. They acknowledge the legitimate role of business, and value what business can bring to our society in the way of jobs, opportunities and wealth. (There have been times when Canada has been in denial on that.)
- Their conception of business is different from that in the United States. They still want to put brakes on market forces – in the public interest. And they also welcome what businesses can bring into their communities as one of several “social partners.”
- Canadians are beginning to clarify what is unique about Canada – about values and principles we wish to see in the actions of individuals, institutions and businesses. I will give you four examples:
  - People and organizations must be accountable for their own actions;
  - We live in a shared community and therefore have a mutual responsibility to help each other in times of need;
  - Our core values are based on equality, justice, respect for diversity, accountability and transparency;
  - We want to be more involved in policy discussion before decisions are made.

Now you may argue that every nation pledges allegiance to equality and justice. What is different is the way that Canadians wish to practice those values.

So let me set out for you the four big differences between Canadian and American values, as defined by Daniel Yankelovich. He is an American authority on public opinion and social trends, who worked with us on the *Citizens' Dialogue* and you can find his text on page 34 of the Report, which is on our web site – [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org)

The two countries are alike in many ways, of course, but here are the differences:

- *Government and the market.* Canadians see the government as a partner, facilitator and guarantor of protections, while Americans see government as the cop and the watchdog.
- *Individual and community.* Canadians share a sense of community and they reject gross inequalities between people. Americans pursue a more assertive individualism which tolerates more inequality.
- *Social morality.* Social morality in Canada is based on a common set of shared norms. American social morality is linked to legalism and religion.
- *Attitudes toward other countries.* Canadians have a deeper sense of obligation to other countries – they see their interdependence. In contrast, Americans use their power to be independent of world opinion.

In the Citizens' Dialogue, we could see a degree of discomfort with the loss of sovereignty associated with economic integration. Many participants were astonished to learn that 87% of our exports go to the United States. Their initial reaction to that was to reduce this dependency by looking for alternative markets.

However, most were ready to accept economic integration on the condition that our leaders be more assertive in upholding the principles which are important to us. They believe that there are, and will continue to be, strong reasons why some policy choices in Canada will be different from those in the United States.

There is a real and ongoing tension between economic integration in North America and a more confident and distinctive Canada which takes pride in its basic social and political norms. But I do not think that Canada and the United States should try to codify these differences. We cannot prescribe the future. Rather, we will have to work with these tensions as issues arise. And at times, we will have to make difficult choices between these two goals.

## **Conclusions**

Let me close with a couple of comments.

First, what does this new distinctive and confident Canada mean for our own political process? Canadians are thirsting for an ongoing national dialogue on public policy. Dialogue is different from debate. Dialogue is about learning from each other, staying informed, and having the opportunities to think the issues through.

Given the pace of change, our leaders will only be successful if they have engaged in sustained two-way communication with the Canadian people. Good decision-making and social cohesion will demand a well-informed and fully engaged public as well as good leadership.

Second, what do Canadians want in North America? They want government to serve as a partner, not a watchdog. They want to avoid gross inequalities and share a sense of community. They want people to live by a common set of social norms, and they want to be responsible global citizens.

Is there room for this kind of Canada in a politically integrated North America? It seems inconceivable now. But as we all know, Canada was built through a process of accommodation where differences have been respected. We also know there are enormous differences between regions *within* the United States. Who knows what direction that country will take in the future?

Let's just say that the fit does not look good today.

**References:**

Michael Adams, 2003. *Fire and Ice*, Penguin

Mary Pat MacKinnon, Judith Maxwell, Steven Rosell and Nandini Saxena, 2003. *Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Social Contract* [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org)

Matthew Mendelsohn, *Canada's Social Contract: Evidence from Public Opinion* [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org)