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## The Press Looks at the Political Future of Canada and the United States in the 21st Century--Where Do We Stand, and Where Are We Headed (A U.S. Viewpoint)

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THE PRESS LOOKS AT THE POLITICAL FUTURE OF  
CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
– WHERE DO WE STAND, AND WHERE ARE WE HEADED?  
(A U.S. VIEWPOINT)

*Howard Schneider*\*

It is good timing that I was invited to speak at this particular time because shortly after I accepted the invitation, *The Washington Post* asked me if I would move to Egypt and cover the Middle East. It was a tough choice for me and my family because I knew there would be a lot of things about Canada that we would dearly miss such as the times I have spent at Cape Spear in Newfoundland watching the fog settle in. It is just a beautiful sight. That really attracted me and held me to the country. But then I thought I should go ahead and move to Cairo. It would finally be a chance to write about a region whose politics are comprehensible. So, I will be leaving Toronto, which makes this kind of a commencement address for me, a chance to stitch together some of the thoughts and the perceptions I have had about Canada and the United States in the relatively short time I have been the *Washington Post's* Canadian correspondent.

Toward that end, I thought it would be fun to share some of the reactions I got when I first arrived in Toronto and started interviewing people: from Anna Porter, the president of Keyporter Publishing, which is sort of a cultural institution in Toronto, who asked me what horrible mistake I had made to earn this job; from the cast of the Royal Canadian Air Force who commented that it must be like covering Norway; from various politicians around the country, "*The Washington Post* has a Bureau in Canada? What did we do wrong?" Other journalists typically asked, "how often do you write, annually or bi-annually?"

I do not want to dwell on the polarities underlying these statements because they have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere, even to the point of cliché. They are broad. They do hold an element of truth but, stretched too far, they break and do not reflect the true tapestry of either nation.

Canadians on the whole are more reserved, but that has not prevented Canadian mining companies from taking some pretty high-flying risks. Per-

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haps their society is more polite and in order, but that does not stop assault-level attacks at junior hockey games, or yield any evidence of higher honor like the proceedings during the Somalia Commission, or the Krever Inquiry.

And as for "peace, order, and good government," I am sure Guy-Paul Morin, jailed for a murder he did not commit, has some second thoughts about state power in a country that allows people to be prosecuted consecutively for the same crime. Likewise, Canadians see the United States as a monolithic culture south of the border, but this view overlooks a regional mix that is at least as rich and as diverse as Canada's. Consider the status of the French language in Canada's largest province, Ontario. No more than three to five percent of Ontarians use French at home. That is about the same percentage as in Louisiana, and might even be less. Instead, I wanted to focus on why reactions such as those quoted above in jest still have such currency in Canada in 1998, and consider whether that relates to issues of sovereignty being discussed at this conference.

For that, let me turn back a few decades to a book considered to be one of the classics in Canadian political philosophy, George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*.<sup>1</sup> Grant, writing in 1963 and in a later forward in 1970, wrote, as if the game was undeniably over, that Canada of his imaging had disappeared and was homogenized and rendered indistinct by technological imperatives established by the United States, forced, in the words of Carleton University Professor Peter C. Emberley, "to live out the aridity and the flatness of the culture defining the technological empire south of us."

Consider that phrase for a second, "the aridity and the flatness of the culture south of us," and consider the society to which this applies; the society that invented jazz, blues, and rock and roll; that created new ways of cooking and new styles of dress; new methods of architecture and styles of painting; new literary movements and new theatrical forms; not to mention the motion picture. Here are Grant's own words: "[t]he central problem for English-speaking Canada has always been, in what ways and for what reasons do we have the power and the desire to maintain some independence of the American empire?"

It is my contention that this string of thought, in part, rests on a confusion among the various cultures that operate in a society, the culture of business and politics, for example, versus the culture of the human spirit. I speak of a confusion between the way we manufacture things, make decisions, and establish administrative relationships, the stuff you all are concerned with every day, and the ways in which we express and identify ourselves. On one front, Grant's lamentation does not square with the world's evolution since

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<sup>1</sup> GEORGE GRANT, *LAMENT FOR A NATION: THE DEFEAT OF CANADIAN NATIONALISM* (MacMillan of Canada, 1978).

he first wrote, while on the other, the Canada he imagines never really did, nor was it designed to, exist.

Let me restate Grant's problem another way. Why, in a country with secure borders, plentiful resources, a high standard of living, and countless other benefits, do so many people seem to feel so edgy about their place in the world? Often when this theme comes up, the discussion turns towards the United States in the sense that, somehow, Canada remains dependent on them in an almost colonial way. But its sovereignty in other words is compromised. This argument mistakes sovereignty for the power to make a choice from available options with the ability to choose precisely the path with precisely the outcome you want. No country is free to do that. Every nation of people operates under constraints. The issue in Canada is the perception that too many of its constraints come from one place, the United States. But, as Grant notes, "[w]e are like the child of some stockbroker who can enjoy the fruits of his father's endeavours by living the swinging life, but likes to exclude from his mind where the money comes from. Like most other human beings, Canadians want it both ways. We went through formal nationalism to escape the disadvantages of the American dream, yet we also want the benefits of the junior membership in the empire."<sup>2</sup> The issue, it seems to me, is not so much America constraining Canada's sovereignty in any way, but in how Canada itself raises the costs and the benefits of doing things a certain way.

If decisions are made that enough people feel disrupt or threaten the country's way of life, then that is an issue for Canada's political system to address, not one for which the United States or any other country in the world should atone. If a different path needs to be followed, it can be, once the costs are confronted and accepted as part of the deal. It is nice for farmers in Quebec, for example, that their dairy industry is protected. It is not so nice for farmers in British Columbia who have to pour milk down the sewer because they exceeded Central Planning's quota. Neither is it nice for the consumers to pay more than they would if chicken farmers like Frank Perdue were free to move north.

In this area, Canada has made a choice, and it has accepted the price. So it is with the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), for example. I cannot predict whether this is a good deal for Canada or not, or whether it is a good deal for the United States for that matter, but I twinge when I hear it mentioned in the same breath as sovereignty. These are two very different things; the nation's power to choose being one thing, and the propriety, efficiency, or the advantage of a particular choice being another.

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

Too often in Canada, it seems, sovereignty becomes the surrogate issue substituted for the parsing of possible outcomes.

The communal risk analysis that needs to be done with something as complex as the MAI is a lot harder to carry out than it is to raise issues about freedom and sovereignty in the next generation's birthright. Nations make agreements, nations break agreements. Canada has the power, the sovereignty, to choose. She also has the capacity to change her mind if the repercussions of a particular choice prove onerous. In that respect, the country remains, and will remain sovereign, regardless of how many incremental steps are made to harmonize regulations or open borders to capital, or make whatever administrative legal adjustments seem logical.

To the argument that trends in the United States or pressure from U.S.-based corporations set the path which Canada must follow, I say, every nation, including the United States, is influenced by what happens in the world marketplace. No country lives in isolation. If you asked U.S. automakers in the 1970s how sovereign they felt, they would say "not very." If you asked President Carter how sovereign he felt during the oil embargo or the hostage crisis, he would have said "not very." If you would have asked my father how sovereign he felt after the U-2 overflights of Cuba showed missile bases under construction, he would have said "not very."

The fact is that the MAI, which is perhaps beneficial to many U.S. companies and investors, is the result of global financial trends driven by forces far bigger than the U.S. corporate lobby. The fact that mutual funds are now made attractive to middle class investors on the basis of projects in Asia or Latin America tells a far more revealing story than does any notion of U.S. corporate imperialism. As a global community, we know more about each other and we have the cultural, economic, and political information to take more risks in more exotic places. No doubt, Canadian companies will fall into foreign hands should the MAI go into effect and no doubt some capital otherwise invested in Canada will find its way out of the country. But, likewise, Canadian investors will find opportunities abroad that they otherwise would not have found. It is a dynamic situation, to be evaluated across a panoply of variables, not simplified to one under-riding denominator. Canada approaches that choice freely, can evaluate it freely, and can succeed or fail under whatever regime she decides upon freely. Likewise with banking, if consolidations and the potential for more of them in the United States is what is pushing Canadian banks along, that certainly did not begin and nor will it end in the United States.

The economies of scale created by information technology, the increasingly global savvy of capital, and the recognition that properly managed, large institutions can remain consumer friendly are all pushing the industry to

consolidate. My uncle was an executive at the old Maryland National Bank based in Baltimore. I remember the aesthetics of his branch in Cambridge where I grew up; the cool marble counter and the lollipops that the drive-through clerk gave away. When Maryland National was bought by NationsBank, I objected to the idea mostly because NationsBank was not the bank where my uncle worked. It was not the name of the bank where I kept my money. Today, who cares? There are no lollipops, but the service is better. When NationsBank makes its first Canadian acquisition, I am sure there will be lots of talk about sovereignty, talk that will ultimately mean little more to most consumers than a name change on their ATM card.

Canada may, of course, choose sovereignty to protect its banking system. It may even turn down the two proposed mergers between four of its top five banks. Her sovereignty does not change either way. It simply means she has chosen to trade one set of perceived values for another. So, in a very basic way, I do not accept the tenet that Canada lacks sovereignty, is in danger of losing her sovereignty, or was, once the basic border issues were settled, in danger of losing her sovereignty to the United States. So why is it that we still find so many self-inflicted wounds like in Mordecai Richler's novel:

When I was in seventh grade Mrs. Ogilvy turned her dynamite bum to our class and wrote on the blackboard, 'Canada is A. a dictatorship; B. a post-colonial democracy; C. a theocracy?' None of the above answers apply. The truth is Canada is a cloud cuckoo-land, an insufferably rich country governed by idiots, its self made problems offering comic relief to the ills of the real world out there, where famine and racial strife and vandals in office are the unhappy rule.<sup>3</sup>

I think the root of George Grant's lament, in fact, deals with sovereignty of a different sort, sovereignty of spirit or lack of it. It still makes many Canadians uncomfortable with their situation, which I feel is one of the foundations of the continuing muddle with Quebec. The comments I quoted at the beginning to me are not the sign of a people comfortable with their place in the world. The fact that an historian in a recent book can re-interpret issues like the free trade vote as Canadians giving up the ghost, rather than asserting a sovereign choice after weighing costs and benefits, is not the sign of a society that has much trust in itself. The fact that the arbiters of Canadian pop culture, like Ralph Benmergui and the gang at *CBC Newsworld*, choose to devote two hours of their money and air time to coverage of the Paula Jones

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<sup>3</sup> MORDECAI RICHLER, *BARNEY'S VERSION: A NOVEL* (Knopf, 1997).

decision to appeal her suit against President Clinton,<sup>4</sup> an event of no possible practical significance to Canada, reflects to me a society not quite sure where it sits.

Every nation has its cross to bear, fundamental issues that carry the weight of historical circumstance, as with the MAI, international banking, or milk quotas, and the social and cultural forebears are not cost-free either. In the case of the United States, I can point out two critical problems, guns and racial tension. These are deeply rooted in history and continue to challenge the country today. Gun ownership and the empowerment of the individual that it represents, vis-à-vis the state, was so significant to the country's beginnings that we chose to enshrine it in the Constitution. Having chosen that path, which was logical for the times, we struggle to cope with ridiculously high murder rates in the present day. What would be a nasty domestic squabble or a fistfight in Winnipeg becomes a shooting in the United States because the weaponry is out there. Similarly, having chosen slavery, the United States had to fight its bloodiest war and still struggles to cope with the present day social, economic, and cultural costs that its legacy exacts. We are what we chose to be, having made the choice. We must bear the consequences of becoming. So it is with Canada.

What Grant defines as his central problem is not so much an issue to be wrestled with in a court of public policy and opinion as it is a condition of existence to be, through the ages, sometimes forlornly cognizant that the United States created a new culture on its piece of continent, while Canada chose, in large part, to borrow one. Grant himself recognizes this:

Perhaps we should rejoice in the disappearance of Canada. We leave the narrow provincialism and our backwards culture. We enter the excitement of the United States, where all of the great things are being done. Who would compare the science, the art, and the politics of our petty world to the overflowing achievements of New York, Washington, Chicago, and San Francisco?<sup>5</sup>

Think of William Faulkner, and then of Morley Callaghan. Think of the Kennedys and the Rockefellers, then think of Lester Pearson and E.P. Taylor. As Grant points out, without I feel, carrying his analysis to the logical ends, the foundation of Canada emphasized tradition over experimentation, safety over risk, and what was known and familiar over what was uncertain and new. If Canadians through the years have felt tugged by events, perhaps they

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<sup>4</sup> Paula Jones, an Arkansas state employee, filed a sexual harassment suit against then-Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas, a resolution of which was still pending at the time this issue went to press.

<sup>5</sup> GRANT, *supra* note 1.

can look to the fact that their founding families chose a path they thought would most likely continue as status quo, rather than one that would force them to invent themselves anew.

This is not the type of attitude likely to foster new literary movements as the ones that arose with the U.S. transcendentalists in the 1800s, or the beats in the 1950s. These are not the conditions that invent new styles of music, like blues and jazz or bluegrass or gospel. These are not the conditions that can borrow comic traditions from one set of immigrants and come up with something like Hollywood. These are, instead, the conditions of a pleasant life which the Canadians have had. We can argue over the details, but the country's problems are, in the main, manageable.

Consider employment for a moment. I do not argue that, despite the difference in employment rates, almost double in some circumstances, unemployment may be more of a problem in the United States, overlaying as it is with issues of race passed through generations and concentrated, as it is, among a particular urban demographic. In Canada, the supports remain stronger, and the problem is of a different nature. Travel to Newfoundland, for example, and you will hear a lot of complaining about the lack of work, but you will also see people living in well-kept communities, self-reliant and getting by very well with what they have. No doubt, the argument will come back that the reason Canadian culture has not evolved is because of the constraints imposed by the United States, that the market is saturated with U.S.-generated images and ideas which crowd out any local expression and produce homogenized aesthetics.

On that front, is there anyone here who truly thinks Canada is a more homogenous place today than in 1963 when Grant informed us that Canada no longer existed? If anything, the peculiarities of each province are as strong as ever, and immigrants have all added their own voices and flavors to the mix. What has not happened in Canada is the creation of an overarching song that everyone in every province sees and hears and feels. There has been no distillation of "procreate or die" in Newfoundland or Quebec or Shediac or Red Deer or Prince Rupert, into what it means to be Canadian.

Let me suggest the genius of American culture, the groundwork our forbears laid for all of its faults, is its ability to allow the voices and ideas of immigrants and minorities to raise themselves and create something new. The melting pot, to me, is badly misconstrued in Canada. It is not a place that produces sameness, but one in which each flavor enhances the others. In doing so, there are changes, but it still sustains the whole. U.S. politics have been in many ways more abusive, and doctrines have been more demanding and, at times, less tolerant of dissent. But, the culture of the United States has been arranged to elevate new forms and sounds and sights. Grant failed to



recognize or confront this. He focused on the means of production, not on the means of living; on the means of worshipping God, as opposed to the means of experiencing the here and now.

Walt Whitman's classic *Leaves of Grass* is a bit tarnished in Washington these days.<sup>6</sup> It is the book President Clinton gave as a present shortly after he met Monica Lewinsky, a student intern at the White House in 1996. He has apparently given it to a lot of people, including his wife Hillary, on their first date. As Maureen Dowd said in the *New York Times* the other day, "Whoops." But the opening words of the book still resonate, "I celebrate myself."<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Canadian writer John Raulston Saul has tried to get at this issue in his recent book, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin*.<sup>8</sup> He tries to re-imagine and re-contextualize Canada as an early post-modern state, a place that invented a new style of anti-imperial politics when it forged its English and French halves. Rather than one suppressing the other, the likely response of a state erected on traditional blood, tribal, or imperial lines, the aim was to create a framework for both to thrive.

I feel two ways about this. One, if it were true, it would be felt in the bones of Canadians today, rather than having to be retroactively explained to them. Saul can reinterpret, but he cannot reeducate. And second, Saul's thesis does not lay the groundwork for the type of cultural satisfaction he wants to provide, but rather offers an explanation for why Canadian culture seems so atomized. Canada's genius, he seems to be saying, is in creating administrative structures that can accommodate diverse demands without requiring the authors of those demands to accept any cultural baggage. It is a place where the issues, even cultural ones, which are described with phrases like "cultural products," become wholly managerial. Come here; pay this tax; here is what we will put on the table; then go about your business. Do not expect to draw meaning from this society. You will have to supply that for yourself.

This, in fact, is the dynamic at work in much of the art produced in Canada. Let us distinguish for a minute between Canadian culture and culture in Canada. If I mention Chinese architecture or Japanese painting, Italian Opera or French fashion, Spanish dancing, German music, or Mexican food, you all know what I am talking about and could probably discuss the ways in which those cultures found a new way of doing things and created new forms of expression. All of these things represent departures or inventions. You can do the same with many of the same categories in the United States. You cannot do the same with Canada. The country was not created to serve the demands

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<sup>6</sup> WALT WHITMAN, *LEAVES OF GRASS* (1855).

<sup>7</sup> WALT WHITMAN, *Song of Myself*, in *LEAVES OF GRASS* (1855).

<sup>8</sup> JOHN RALSTON SAUL, *REFLECTIONS OF A SIAMESE TWIN: CANADA AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY* (Viking, 1997).

of cultural innovation. We could list dozens of world-class Canadian artists, and we could cite the peculiarly Canadian situations found in the work of various writers or painters, but we would be hard-pressed to define Canadian literature, Canadian theater, Canadian dance, dress, or cuisine as in any way form-breaking.

And here is where we get to Quebec, the other front on which sovereignty is discussed in Canada. For most of the cultural outlets listed above, you can find ways in which Quebec's society congeals and adheres around its own ways of expression, whether it is their fondness for Pepsi instead of Coke, the distinct dress of the voyageurs, unpasturized cheese, or the salty flavor of lamb fed on the banks of the St. Lawrence. Quebecers have an undeniable sense of self, of place, and of cultural innovation. It is evident on the television, where the people there watch shows that are produced in their province, which are evocative of their lives, instead of watching the abundance of U.S. programming that is preferred elsewhere in Canada. Language, I submit, is only part of the issue. As important as it might be as an element in the mix, it does not explain wholly why Quebec producers and writers and actors are able to consistently capture the attention of their population and produce shows, heaven forbid, which survive off of the revenues they earn. If I could offer an aphorism that, to me, captures the divide, it is this: whereas Quebec is a culture in search of a state, Canada is a state in search of a culture.

An analogy from our information age is that Canada is a creation of digital thinking that looks to solve specific managerial problems without a vision from life that would proceed from it. I feel that is why the work of some of Canada's best-known artists, the Atom Egoyans and the David Cronenbergs of the world, has so little to do with Canada. It is a prime environment for idiosyncrasy because the slate is blank.

They are there, by the way, to enjoy the situation, as much as officialdom in Ottawa might complain about the economies of the film industry. Both have been offered big-budget Hollywood films, and they do not take them because they do not want to give up creative control. It does, however, still leave a void that Canadians seem to feel, save for those in Quebec, and that is why so many people in Quebec, separatists or not, are concerned about drawing too close to what they see as a cultural void as opposed to the atomized culture apparent in much of the rest of Canada. Quebec is like an old analog clock, elegant, charming in its embellishments, and in its organic completeness.

Jean Charest's election will not even begin to address this sensibility. I think, in essence, that there are two very different world views at work, and they will be difficult to bridge between Canada and Quebec. Canada as a sovereign political entity will certainly survive. Whether it achieves cultural

sovereignty is a different matter requiring those outside Quebec to do some serious reckoning with their history. We will all recognize it if it happens, not through rapprochement between Ottawa and Quebec City, but when episodes of *Les Boys*<sup>9</sup> or broadcasts with subtitles appear in Vancouver and get the same laughs as they do in Quebec; or when that Francophone Hip Hop, a real delightful sound, is played on the radio stations in Toronto. I am not sure it will ever happen. Existential issues like this are not solved with a Royal Commission or a constitutional amendment. Our successors will probably be having the same discussions in another one hundred years, and Canada will be just as healthy, just as rich, and just as hungry for a vision of itself.

Let me close from a quote from Ray Conlogue, a Montreal correspondent for the *Globe and Mail*, whose book, *Impossible Nation*, is a wonderfully succinct account of some of these issues:

This process by which people gives itself a cultural identity is a mysterious one, and there is no way of knowing whether English Canada will succeed. But by acknowledging the task that lies before us, we can at least know that we have set out in the right direction.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> LES BOYS (Richard Goudreau, prod. 1997).

<sup>10</sup> RAY CONLOGUE, *IMPOSSIBLE NATION: THE LONGING FOR HOMELAND IN CANADA AND QUEBEC* (Mercury Press, 1996).