THE TRUE WHITE NORTH: REFLECTIONS ON BEING CANADIAN

Colin Robertson

For Colin Robertson, Canadian sovereignty is primarily framed as a question of identity. "If our national sport is hockey, then our national preoccupation is our identity," he writes. And always, Canadian identity is defined in contrast or comparison to "our huge neighbour to the south." He adds: "The Confederation of British North America was as much an unintended consequence of the American Civil War," which saw hundreds of thousands of American troops still in uniform, and many casting covetous eyes north wards. Both of Canada's two founding language communities have had issues of identity, the English in affirming their essential difference from Americans, and the French concerned with their survival on an English-speaking continent.

Selon Colin Robertson, la souveraineté du Canada est avant tout affaire d'identité. « Si le hockey est notre sport national, écrit-il, notre identité est une énorme préoccupation nationale. » Comme toujours, l'identité canadienne se définit par opposition ou par comparaison avec « notre imposant voisin du sud ». L'auteur ajoute que « la confédération de l'Amérique du Nord britannique est aussi une conséquence involontaire de la guerre de Sécession », qui a vu des centaines de milliers de soldats américains toujours en uniforme, parmi lesquels beaucoup lorgnaient au nord avec convoitise. Les deux communautés linguistiques fondatrices du Canada ont toutes deux connu des problèmes d'identité, les anglophones cherchant à se démarquer des Américains et les francophones à survivre sur un continent d'expression anglaise.

What is it to "be Canadian"? The question of who we are and what defines our identity has preoccupied Canadians, more than people of any other nationality, since Confederation. If our national sport is hockey, then our national preoccupation is our identity. It has created a cottage industry in the groves of academe, in the theatre of politics and media, and it has been a perennial source of inspiration and income for Canadian book publishers.

Why is this so? For one thing we are a new nation, even after 141 years of nationhood. And paradoxically, we are a nation born out of the prolonged birth pangs of another nation, our huge neighbour to the south, with whom we share a history of arrival in the New World, a rich immigrant experience, and a prolonged colonial nurturing. When the American Revolution ruptured the 13 colonies' ties with Britain, we remained umbilically attached, and thus became ourselves and not them. When the American Union was reforged in the Civil War, the Canadian Confederation was obliged to stretch from sea to sea, or face immersion in the American expansion. Once again, we remained ourselves by becoming not-them.

For a nation that was created out of one century of shared colonial memory and almost another of affiliation with a far away colonial power, it is not surprising that the texture of national identity is heavily laced with ambiguity. "Canadian-ness" has always been a matter of contingency, never one of certainty.

American experience relies on an assertion of shared history (Lincoln's "mystic chords of memory"), common ancestry ("consanguinity") and pride in being part of a historical social experiment named America. With pride, Americans put their hands on their hearts and recite the pledge of allegiance to both a nation and to a series of ideas that culminate in "one nation," which has also been "under God" since 1954. The American civic tradition has been to depoliticize the past in order to assuage, with success, the wounds of revolution and the scars of civil war. Resolution of the struggle over civil rights remains an act in progress, but that act is seen as a continuation of the struggles that brought the nation into existence. In the United States of America, the past and the present have always been about the future.

Canadian experience, like Canadian identity, is less straightforward. There has always been more division and ambiguity about "shared" history and less exuberance to our nationalism. It was not as if our "founding nations" set out to create Canada. The Loyalists fought for a united British America, while the French had spent many of the previous 150 years fighting for the opposite. The Confederation of British North America was as much an unintended consequence of the American Civil War and the recognition that "manifest destiny" could well result if Reconstructionists decided to send their battle-seasoned veterans across the 49th parallel.

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The Canadian emphasis on diversity was born out of the British struggle to contain the 13 resurgent colonies in their expansion to the west: one of the sparks of American revolution was the British insistence on retaining rights for what we now call the First Nations. That insistence was mainly honoured in the breach, but it means that even before we came into national existence we celebrated multiple memories rather than a monolithic, collective memory. And that multiplicity was made eternal in the document paradoxically known as the *British North America Act*.

Canada has always been a deal based on choice, rather than a universal idea made manifest. And thus the eternal question about our identity.

The irony is that the rest of the world knows who we are and what we stand for, no matter how problematical we find those issues. The problem is not the brand abroad but the brand at home.

"One disadvantage of living in Canada," writes Northrop Frye, "is that one is continually called upon to make statements about the Canadian identity, and Canadian identity is an eminently exhaustible subject." A statue symbolizing Canada, say some, would portray someone holding his breath and crossing his fingers.

The former Canadian Conrad Black, whose knowledge of history fortifies his penchant for provocation, once argued that we have no real rationale as a country, pronouncing that, "Canada is the only substantial country in the world with no cultural, linguistic or tribal homogeneity, nor any distinct revolutionary, ideological, or geopolitical tradition to give it an organizing principle." (There is also, of course, India.)

Canada exists because Sir John A. Macdonald was resolutely anti-American, argues Richard Gwyn in his excellent new biography of the "man who made us." Macdonald, who viewed America as both "godless"(an amusing notion, given modern perspectives) and "radically progressive," was determined, says Gwyn, that Canada would remain the "un-America," and this conviction would manifest itself in the construction of the coast-to-coast railway and the formulation of the National Policy.

W.L. Morton, who at university taught me the story of our first pan-Canadian "national" institution — the Hudson's Bay Company — told us that it was by design that our fathers of Confederation chose "peace, order and good government" as their slogan. Not for us manifest destiny and the blandishments of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

And yet he saw those civic platitudes as having a magnificence of their own. As Morton put it in a series of lectures, later published as *The Canadian Identity*, we have constructed "the greatest of civilizations in the grimmest of environments and elaborated in one of the largest, harshest and most intimidating countries on Earth."

And so defining ourselves by what we are not — American — continues to be the most common response to the question "What is it to be Canadian?"

Contemporary Ontario philosopher Mark Kingwell says this is not necessarily a mark of inadequacy in national definition, because "If you were the only dissenter in a room holding a dozen people, standing up and saying 'I'm not the same as you' would be a clear mark of moral courage." (Thus he is taking up an argument that had been made, more opaquely, a generation earlier by the influential Canadian philosopher George Grant.)

In a column the *New York Times* chose not to publish, Kingwell went on to argue:

> *In any event, Canadian identity goes well beyond a game of I-know-you-are-but-what-am-I. For generations, we have been busy creating, in your shadow, a model of citizenship that is inclusive, diverse, open-ended and transnational. It is dedicated to far-reaching social justice and the rule of international law. And we're successfully exporting it around the world not by bucking the UN, but by seeing it for the flawed but necessary agency it is.*

Kingwell's argument is for a Canadian identity that has flourished under the shade-tree of benign colonialism. That is, indeed, a fundamen-

tally Canadian thing to do. And yet, it also has its ambiguities, notably the fact that for some founding Canadians, colonialism was not always consenting or benign. For Michaëlle Jean, speaking at the Supreme Court in the ceremony to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the promulgation of Canadian citizenship in April (a shorter span of time than the existence of every province except Newfoundland and Labrador), our "Frenchness" is integral to our being.

In 1775, Quebec was the strategic colony whose adherence to the American Revolution would have severed British ties to the North American interior and rendered impossible any chance of Canada's existence. Since then, Quebec's place, or possible lack thereof, in Confederation has been a strategic factor in our nation's existence and a constant theme in our periodic identity crisis. Quebec is the cornerstone of our diversity, and the challenge to any simplistic claim to national homogeneity.

Too often forgotten is that our "Frenchness" is pan-Canadian and not, as separatists would prefer, the exclusive preserve of *pur laine* Quebec. This is personified by those French-Canadians who have made a better Canada from outside the confines of the original colonial territory, such as Jeanne Sauvé, born in Saskatchewan, Gabrielle Roy, born in my native Manitoba, and Michaëlle Jean, born in Haiti.

Like the other countries of the New World, we are a country "under construction," and successive waves of newcomers continue the building process. Our open door (relatively speaking) approach to immigration means that currently one in five Canadians was born outside Canada.

This past summer I revisited Pier 21 in Halifax, one of the "seven wonders of Canada" and the creation of the incomparable Ruth Goldbloom. Every Canadian should visit this former immigration centre, where one million immigrants landed between 1928 and 1971, and reflect on our "immigrant experience."

Canada, writes historian Des Morton, is peopled by adventurers and "history's losers," those people who found themselves on the wrong side of conflict and power structures. The adventurers came in search of the riches of the Indies. The "losers" came in search of sanctuary. Both sought opportunity, and settled for fishing, trapping and logging. If they were lucky and made money, they could then consider leaving the land that Voltaire described as "quelques arpents de neige." Many did. Those who came after were often independent thinkers and iconoclasts.

Finding what Arthur Schlesinger has described as the "vital centre" has been the path to success in Canadian politics. The accommodation between Upper and Lower Canada — the compromises of Baldwin and LaFontaine, and later Macdonald and Cartier — extended beyond language to law, religion and education. From the beginning it was the only practical way to keep French Canada and English Canada together; thus bilingualism, a civil code and the Napoleonic code. In the beginning this consensual deal-making was the only way to achieve nationhood and ensure its survival. Perhaps it still is. We don't always get it right, but we carry on improvising until we find a way or become comfortable with the status quo.

After 1760, French Canadians were left behind when their leaders sailed home to France. The Loyalists lost the American War of Independence and fled north or home to Britain, and their recriminations still occasionally colour our national debates.

But from the British Isles after 1815 came the refugees from the depression that followed the Napoleonic wars and the Irish potato famine. In the 1890s came those who fled pogrom and poverty in central and northern Europe and tsarist Russia. Sir Wilfrid Laurier and his immigration minister, Sir Clifford Sifton, knew their value. As Sifton phrased it, the settlement of the West would be well served by "a stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat, born on the soil, whose forefathers have been farmers for 10 generations, with a stout wife and a half-dozen children." It helped if that stalwart figure remained a Loyalist.

My Scots and Irish ancestors migrated to Canada at this time. They fit into Des Morton's paradigm. One great-grandfather was a remittance man who'd been obliged to change his name on leaving the "old country." Shortly after arriving, he bunked off, leaving his wife and six children to fend for themselves. Fortunately for me, they did.

In the 20th century, thanks to the vision of Sifton and Laurier, Canada became a land of hope for those seeking opportunity as well as a safe haven for those fleeing oppression — including Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Chileans, Latin Americans and, more recently, the Vietnamese, the people of Hong Kong, and the varied peoples of Africa.

Since 1980 over half of new Canadians have come from Asia, with a contribution as important to nation-building in Canada as the much more public (and controversial) flow of Latinos into the United States.

I think the trauma of "being on the wrong side" has worked to our



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Governor General Michaëlle Jean represents the francophone stream of Canadian identity as well as the nation of immigrants — her family came to this country from Haiti when she was a child.

advantage. Combined with our rainbow of diverse origins and the necessity of having to manage our international affairs in the shadow of hegemons, however benevolent, it has obliged a certain patience and tolerance. When applied adroitly, it gives us the skill set necessary for consensus-building at home and abroad.

What else gives us our "Canadianness"? First, our sense of the North and our sense of nature.

The North is our equivalent of the American "frontier," and it continues to hold our imagination. It is a frontier that we embrace rather than ignore. The struggle with climate, geography and our northern destiny now has a new resonance with the promise of oil, gas and diamonds; the threat of global warming; and the geopolitics in the Arctic related to the Northwest Passage.

Second, our sense of good government, which is also a function of our sense of self in a vast natural expanse.

Confronted by a cold climate and a vast geography, with our population mostly huddled within a few hundred miles of the American border, we accept that government will play a lead role in creating national institutions.

- In transportation, this meant investment (and scandal) in canals, railroads, roads and airlines.
- In communications, this meant the CBC and CRTC.
- Our red-serged RCMP has populist recognition, from *Rose Marie* to *Due South* and now *Corner Gas*.
- In health care, there was Medicare, begun by Tommy Douglas in

Saskatchewan, and John Diefenbaker in Ottawa, who appointed the Hall Commission. It was finally implemented by Lester B. Pearson, the leader of two great minority governments in the 1960s.

All of these things — our colonial experience, our fundamental sense of diversity, our consciousness of our small hold on a vast territory and our consensus that government is a shared social resource — have played a role in a third Canadian national characteristic: our deeply non-antagonistic political culture.

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Marshall McLuhan concluded that Canadians are masters of what Bertrand Russell called the 20th century's highest achievement: "the technique of suspended judgement."

This probably explains why, when Peter Gzowski ran a competition to determine the Canadian equivalent of "as American as…apple pie" the winning entry was "as Canadian as…possible under the circumstances."

The practice of "good governance" has become a Canadian expertise that we now freely share through organizations like the Canadian-inspired Forum of Federations.

Third, our sense of improvisation and humour.

We may not be so forcefully "can-do" as the Americans but we are surprisingly inventive, and because we don't have the resources and money, we improvise, innovate and make things work with what we have on hand — be it zippers or pacemakers, the Ski-Doo or the Blackberry.

To survive in this intemperate climate, manage our remarkable pluralism and get along with the "Colossus" next door, we've had to develop a sense of humour that is gentle, self-deprecating, and subtle (unless it is directed at our southern neighbours). Compare Rick Mercer, *This Hour has 22 Minutes, Royal Canadian Air Farce* and *Têtes à Claque* with Leno, Letterman, Colbert and Stewart.

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Fourth, our sense of internationalism. Canada's willing colonialism of the British Imperial era has morphed into something new and important. This is why Lester Pearson and the Nobel Peace Prize remain a core part of Canadian iconography. We were not just present but we were active participants in the creation of the United Nations and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and other multilateral organizations, including the Commonwealth and la Francophonie. The St-Laurent-Pearson-inspired Colombo Plan was as important for postwar education in Asia as the Marshall Plan was for the reconstruction of Europe. Public opinion surveys consistently tell us that whatever our differences at home, what we do and have done beyond our borders — as peacekeepers, peacemakers and multilateralists — gives us pride and a common cause.

We may not be warlike, but we are a nation of warriors. And this, too, is part of our internationalism. We earned a reputation as the Allies' shock troops at the Somme, and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George wrote that "for the remainder of the war they were brought along to head the assault in one great battle after another. Whenever the Germans found the Canadian Corps coming into the line they prepared for the worst."

This past summer, at Menin Gate and Vimy Ridge, my brother and I traced out the names of our great uncles, Harry and Neil, the sons of my grandfather, the remittance man. I keep on my desk giant bronze "pennies" in their memory with the inscription "He died for Freedom and Honour." They are two of the 100,000 who gave their lives for their country in our wars overseas and now lie in far-away fields that are forever Canadian.

Every year Ottawa receives a gift of 10,000 tulip bulbs from the Dutch Royal family in recognition of the refuge given to Princess Juliana and her daughters during the Second World War. It is another reminder that the Canadian identity is recognized, respected and even revered beyond our borders.

The Crown in Canada is another uniquely Canadian institution: we've been a monarchy of one royal family or another since 1534. Its Canadian adaptation, eloquently described by Jacques Monet (*La Monarchie au Canada*) and Michael Jackson (*The Canadian Monarchy in Saskatchewan*), also helped set the stage for that other great, if underappreciated, multilateral

institution, the Commonwealth of Nations. And the Crown, as Prime Minister Harper observed, drawing on a speech given by Winston Churchill during a 1929 tour of Canada, "links us all together with the majestic past that takes us back to the Tudors, the Plantagenets, the Magna Carta, habeas corpus, the Petition of Right and English common law."

But how do we maintain ourselves in our "Canadianness"? Reconciliation with our First Nations aside, probably the greatest challenge for Canada in the 21st century will be the continuing successful selection and integration of new Canadians. The Bouchard-Taylor Commission hearings in Quebec demonstrate the angst, especially in rural communities, around the immigrant influx. But as Michael Adams concludes in *Unlikely Utopia*, there is good reason to be optimistic. Reasonable accommodation, he observes, is "already well paved with laws, rules, norms, institutions and extremely powerful integrative economic, cultural and social forces…Fixing them is a matter of thoughtful improvement not radical reinvention."

Critics say that our current approach lacks accountability for results, and that insufficient resources are devoted to the practical challenges of learning English or French and teaching local mores and customs.

Integration should be a seamless process, beginning in the place of application and continuing in the place of abode. There are models for emulation. When I was posted in Hong Kong during the peak years of migration from the then British colony, we created an evening program to help prepare those who had received their visa for their new life. "Meet with Success" drew inspiration from SUCCESS, perhaps the most successful "integrator" within Canada. The British-Columbia-based organization has helped Chinese immigrants for over 30 years. Finding work is essential to successful integration, and we need talent yet our guild system of professional associations, particularly in the health-related professions, is keeping out rather than bringing in imported competence.

If demography is destiny, continuing immigration — the safety valve of national policy that continues to bring new talent and ideas — is the only recourse in the face of a birth rate that has not sustained our numbers since the 1960s. Competition for talent and ideas is going to increase, and recruitment strategies like those of Shoppers Drug Mart for immigrant pharmacists, will become the rule rather than the exception.

Historian J.M.S. Careless has argued that Canadians are people with what he calls "multiple identities." Multiculturalism is both a policy, with a ministerial portfolio, and a creed that we preach beyond our borders. But have we reached accommodation with diversity, especially in our great cities, at the expense of national cohesion? Hérouxville and the Toronto 18 are a reminder the challenge is never-ending for a country that by design and determination remains "unfinished."

We must keep asking ourselves: was Yann Martel right when he famously observed that Canada is just the "greatest hotel on earth"? If all we have in common is our diversity, do we really have anything in common at all?

Climate and geography has created a dynamic culture that becomes more original as it becomes more diverse. Our culture is now characterized by both a "diversity of authenticities" and an "authenticity of diversity." We can actually inhabit the shoes of others. We are light on our feet. Our culture understands, preserves and integrates many cultures. We do so with enormous success, because we have a sensibility and sensitivity that travels well.

But there is more to be done. We've done a good job in defining the rights of citizenship through the Charter of Rights and our common law, but are we doing enough to define, inform and educate Canadians, "new" or "old," about the responsibilities and obligations that go along with "being Canadian"? Citizenship ceremonies should be celebratory and imbued with the spirit of pomp and circumstance. Bring our artists and our veterans into the classrooms and invite the participation of members of the Order of Canada.

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The 40th anniversary of the Order of Canada has just passed with little fanfare beyond banners and bookmarks and an exhibition at the National Library.

After 40 years it would seem timely to take a look at our honours system. We celebrate public service and there are orders for the military and police but not for the largest group-our civil service. And given the importance of globalization, the Canadian diaspora and the many friends of Canada abroad, why not some form of recognition for them? Other nations have made it a successful part of their statecraft. The Legion d'honneur comes to mind. If the French, one of our founding peoples, can do this, shouldn't we be able to? The linking of politics and prose and the rewarding of

achievement in the arts commensurate with achievement in business or statecraft enlarges, as John F. Kennedy observed, the cultural opportunities for all our citizens.

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Finally, if we are serious about identity, shouldn't we put more emphasis on learning our stories in the classrooms of the nation?

Memory matters — especially in a country that is "unfinished." History is memory and narrative. Memory provides intelligence; stories stimulate our imagination. Out of history comes everything. It explains how we got here and gives us context and perspective — the indispensable building blocks to prepare and plan for the future. History breeds principles, codes, morals, and ethics.

Over the past year I've visited our extraordinary galaxy of galleries and museums. From the Rooms in St. John's (the box the cathedral came in, as Rick Mercer cheekily put it) to the new RCMP Heritage Centre and the Canadian Personalities Hall in the Museum of Civilization, we do history well. And just wait until the new techno-literate Museum of Human Rights opens at the Forks in Winnipeg. So why not give that history to everyone who joins the Canadian experiment, via a year-long family pass to our museums and galleries for every new immigrant?

Historica, the Dominion Institute, Canada's National History Society and the Royal Canadian Geographic Society are among the leading institutions striving to keep Canada's history alive in the hearts and minds of Canadians. They and hundreds of like-minded local historical societies "raise the level of the water" through history fairs and youth engagement and professional development for teachers, keeping alive the torch of memory through interviews and appearances with our veterans; through *The Beaver*, *Kayak* and *Canadian Geographic*; and online through the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, the *Canadian Atlas* and provincial encyclopedias in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. And now there is the Citizenship Institute. All do good work. But each must seek government support and compete on a playing field with museums and galleries, in a country where "heritage" projects get less than 3 percent of private sector giving. Isn't it time for consolidation or, at least more partnerships, with the recognition that the cause matters more than personalities?

If we are serious about an informed citizenry, why isn't a course in Canadian history required for high school graduation? And the larger question: How do we make our past more accessible to Canadians?

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The subject of history and citizenship would seem a natural for the Harper government's new model of focused, time-sensitive task forces.

Having spent a large part of my working career living beyond our borders, I can tell you that the idea or "brand" that Canada represents within North America and elsewhere is hugely envied. Every day, I met people who wanted to come to Canada because of what that brand represents: freedom, cultural diversity and opportunity.

This sensibility and sensitivity are means to an end. The end they serve is to give Canadians the confidence and knowledge to play an increasingly constructive role — first in Canada, and then in the world we share.

The problem, but also the promise, is that the agenda is unfinished. This is the Canadian complaint. But the complaint may have an answer.

Years ago, my friend Denise Chong accompanied her husband, Roger Smith of CTV News, to China. She decided to write about her roots in what became the best-selling and award-winning book, *The Concubine's Children*. After a couple of years in Peking, Denise, who grew up in Prince Rupert, wrote home to her mother that despite having lived and travelled throughout China, she was having trouble coming to terms with her "Chineseness."

Her mother, Winnie, a very practical woman, wrote back:

"You're not Chinese. You're Canadian. Stop trying to feel anything."

Colin Robertson is a career foreign service officer who has served at the United Nations and Canadian consulates in New York and Hong Kong, as consul general in Los Angeles, and as the first head of the Advocacy Secretariat at the Canadian embassy in Washington. He was part of the team that negotiated the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and the North American Free Trade Agreement. He served as president of the Historica Foundation in 2006 and 2007.
robcolin@gmail.com