

Alternative North Americas

What Canada and the United States Can Learn from Each Other

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Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Open Borders and Closing Threats

The United States and Canada simply must have greater confidence that the border is as impermeable as law, technology, and official effort by trained personnel can make it. This is a movement northward problem, not just a travel southward issue, but it is a real problem often ignored in mass media because it has not become a 9/11 or some comparable disaster. Whether or not Canadians believe that Uncle Sam is psychotic over security when he should just be paranoid, they need to cater to his condition.

We can hope that the 2011 “Perimeter Security” agreement will eventually “thin” our thickening border with better intelligence sharing and bureaucratic coordination. We can hope. But it is just as likely that unknown unknowns will lead both to insignificant improvement and continued frustration, rather than a positive outcome. Life along the border will never again be 9/10/2001—Canadians have to grin, or grimace, and bear this reality.

Coincidentally, every media story over how beastly the United States is to Canadians such as Omar Khadr and how put-upon Canadian travelers are in dealing with U.S. “Gestapo-style” border security will be battered upon by U.S. critics as evidence that Canadians are essentially indifferent (beyond lip service) to U.S. security.

Chapter 2: Unsettled Boundaries—That Not Yet Settled Border

We have been fortunate to have had the 3,500 mile “undefended cliché” as a defining feature of our bilateral relationship. It has permitted both countries to assume that the aphorism “good fences make good neighbors” can be treated more as an abstraction than a concrete requirement of barbed wire, steel-slab walls, and other manifestations of national territorial separation.

Good fences do make happier neighbo(u)rs. It is not as if there are Alsace-Lorraine-category problems (or an equivalent of Mexican irredentist claims over the U.S. Southwest and California). But there are missing pickets, sagging posts, need-a-coat-of-paint requirements that are not mitigated by ignoring them. It matters less how these longstanding issues are addressed than that they be addressed: coin toss, direct negotiations (sequential or as a package), formal or legal arbitration, Hague international court, or some individualized mix-and-match “Chinese menu” approach. Some appear trivial on their face (Machias Seal Island), others look as if they were left-overs that slipped through a crack after a 2:00 a.m. negotiation session; still others, like the Beaufort Sea, are now becoming more pointed with prospective oil reserves in play. But the essence remains: get the issues out of diplomatic file folders and resolve them.

Chapter 3: Arctic Sovereignty—Arctic Antics

Arctic sovereignty and the Northwest Passage have been “agree to disagree” problems for 50 years. However, “global warming”—or the perception of such—is forcing an issue that the United States politely did not force to conclusion. Now, we need to come to terms bilaterally on a topic that can no longer be evaded—one which Canadian nationalistic chest-thumping has exacerbated. To be sure, the results on all border and sovereignty problems may not be to Canadian preference; however, Ottawa can live with the consequences just as states throughout history have managed adverse legal decisions. At least decisions will be made in courts of law and not on battlefields.

We brush aside suggestions to recognize Canadian sovereignty over the Northwest Passage (nobody does); it would create invidious precedents for other international waterways, for example, the Straits of Hormuz. But ultimately Washington doesn't trust Canadian commitment to provide unfettered free passage.

Consequently, Washington endures proclamations of Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic and Northwest Passage. We reject this claim clearly but do not belabor it; accepting Canadian sovereignty over the international waters of the Northwest Passage simply will not happen.

Chapter 4: Immigrants and Refugees

Canada and the United States are nations of immigrants; the similarity largely ends at this point. The United States, plagued by porous southern borders, has who-knows-how-many illegal immigrants. Although prospectively much more manageable, Canada has created a growing problem for itself—and for the United States—by allowing illegal immigrants wide ranges of social and legal services while claiming refugee status. Tens of thousands of such individuals have disappeared and may well pose security problems for the United States as well as Canada.

The fact that Canada is lax on illegal immigrants and pseudo “refugees” is primarily an issue for Canadian taxpayers who subsidize a social safety hammock. But when Canada is merely a way-station for those headed south, Canadian indifference becomes an American problem. The ostensible current efforts to strengthen the Canadian immigration system, with more rapid deportation and tougher restrictions on illegal immigration, sound promising in their hypotheses but face stark legal obstacles so that implementation is likely more in the posturing than in the offing.

Chapter 5: Crime and (Lack of) Punishment

If the United States is regarded as overly harsh in its application of justice to criminals, Canada is seen as the epitome of a society that can barely defend its innocents against predators of every design. The absence of capital punishment in Canada is less an example of exalted humanitarianism than a constant affront to the memories of the murdered. There are enough illustrations of Canadian refusal to extradite for the United States to be confident that a cranky

Canadian government would enjoy ripping feathers from the eagle. While kvetching at the expense of incarcerating criminals, Canadian chatterers never calculate the costs of crime deferred by incarceration.

Chapter 6: Human Rights and Wrongs

Based on geographic and historical good fortune, Canada has been able to benefit from such circumstances to develop a society and polity that accrues plaudits on many measures of human rights—certainly in comparison to some of the alternatives. Consequently, Canada believes that it leads the world in the humane, liberal application of noble principles to practical realities.

Nevertheless, Canadian restrictions on free speech are becoming invidious. Extralegal human rights commissions and tribunals permit injustice collectors to bring specious charges of hate speech, resulting in heavy fines and restrictions as well as crushing legal costs that must be borne by the defendants. Their suppression of free speech will have a chilling effect on vigorous public discourse. Canadian human rights commissions on federal and provincial levels may have had origins in the best of intentions; however, they have become instruments of persecution, prompting self-censorship at vast expense for those charged in tribunals that are characterized by irregular, extrajudicial rules and proceedings.

Chapter 7: Language and Discord

The societal commitment to bilingualism (French and English) is ostensibly a noble effort to generate national unity by accommodating the French fact at every official level throughout the country. It has failed. The effort generates endless expense and artificial effort by individuals to qualify in the language of the “other.” In real terms, Canada is no more bilingual than it was a century ago; however, the policy effectively assures that virtually no unilingual individual can start late in Canadian federal politics and expect to learn the second language well enough to compete against those who were born bilingual or learned the second language in their youth. Moreover, language becomes a constant source of societal division (as well as an irritant for those whose “native” language is neither English nor French). Every politico-economic issue transmutes into a language issue.

Canada’s pursuit of equity at the national level between English and French continues to generate anger among Anglophones and indifference by Francophones who remain more concerned over restricting English use in Quebec than speaking French in the rest of Canada. While skill in multiple languages is life-enhancing, it should be a personal choice rather than an implicit societal requirement.

Chapter 8: The Canadian Military and Defense of North America

The Canadian Armed Forces spent most of the past 50 years in a steady, well-documented decline. Although there have been periodic efforts to get the “couch potato” into at least a light exercise routine, skeptics remain skeptical. Canada has implicitly out-sourced its defense to the United States and appears willing to accept the bilateral and international consequences associated with maintaining a trivial military capability.

Unfortunately, national defense is not a national commitment; instead, the Liberal Party and New Democratic Party in Canada implicitly campaign against any military commitment beyond light peacekeeping. Consequently, Canadian defense strategy predictably yo-yos, with the Conservative Party attempting to stretch the envelope when in power and the Liberal Party assuring the envelope is never mailed.

Moreover, Canadians are loathe to use their new Canadian Armed Forces combat capability, and it is a use-it-or-lose-it reality as trained individuals and units retire without transmitting their expertise.

Chapter 9: The Canadian Military and Defense of North America: Scenarios for a Re-Organized Canadian Forces

For a decade, commentary on the Canadian Armed Forces had passed the “viewing with alarm” stage and has become more equivalent to writing an obituary. The Conservatives’ increases in the defense budget and ostensible commitment to equipment purchases look good on paper and excite observers with some initial equipment implementation, but may prove less than a societal commitment to national security.

The 10-year Afghan combat commitment created a rare commodity: trained, equipped, combat-experienced, light infantry battalions. The question is how Canada will use these units since they cannot be stored for the next UN-endorsed, popularly-approved crisis.

Consequently, there are real questions whether any significant Canadian Armed Forces will exist a generation hence—particularly when opposition parties are profoundly skeptical about maintaining substantial military capability. Options range from *de facto* zero military capability through “peacekeeping” to enhanced “second tier” combat effectiveness. Having already out-sourced its defense to the United States, Ottawa still feels free to complain about how its defense is managed.

Chapter 10: Quebec as the Never-Ending Problem

The Canadian effort to operate a state that is bilingual, binational, and bicultural has been an exhausting rather than an exhilarating process. Canada is not “the United States with a French accent.” For Canada, every political, social, cultural, economic, or foreign affairs problem becomes a national unity problem.

While the United States has no interest in an independent Quebec—or fragmentation of other elements in Canada—neither should Canadians believe that the United States has a special stake in preserving a united Canada. Among the great international tragedies of the past century, the dissolution of Canada (presumably in a peaceful Czech-style “velvet divorce”) would rank rather low on the list. Indeed, a number of Canada’s geographic components have the technical qualifications to be nation states, potentially leading to the ultimate affirmation that “the world needs more Canada.”

Chapter 11: Regarding the West: The Best of Times and Its Discontents

Somewhere in the Canadian psyche lurks the suspicion the United States is salivating at the thought of rending Canada into pieces and appropriating the nice parts with energy resources. Coincidentally, Canadians fail to appreciate the degree to which they have taken Western commitment to Canada as a “given” rather than a problem that deserves the level of attention given Quebec. The problem is the obvious one of enormous wealth enjoyed by a small minority. There is a level of envy that, under the guise of virtue, will persuade eastern Canadians to happily exploit the West, believing it has no recourse under the parliamentary system than to acquiesce. Eastern Canadian criticism of Albertan’s “dirty oil” —which fuels the Canadian economy—has a cut-off-nose-to-spite-face element that would be amusing were it not so dangerous for national unity.

In truth, the political straitjacket that defines parliamentary practice leaves the rich-but-weak provinces to be exploited and dependent on the self-imposed limitations of large provinces such as Ontario.

Chapter 12: The Economics of Inequality

The U.S.-Canada economic relationship is characterized by an exponential difference of 10 to one. The ratio pertains both to the massive difference in our populations (approximately 313 million to 34 million as of mid-2013) and the commensurate disproportion of our economies. Canada has struggled against this reality and sought greater appreciation of its economic strength both bilaterally and internationally.

Nevertheless, there has been a sense in Ottawa that in bilateral economics, the United States may be the 800-pound gorilla compared to Canada’s 80-pound chimpanzee, but the chimp can generally manipulate the relationship to its advantage. It can even poke the gorilla upon occasion—so long as its pokes avoid blatant stick-in-the-eye actions.

Consequently, there are a number of occasions in which Canada extracted a better deal than the juxtaposing economic factors might have suggested, such as the 1965 Auto Pact, the 1991 Civil Aviation Agreement, in softwood lumber, the BSE controversy, and the persistent bilateral trade deficit.

Chapter 13: Shibboleths

There are a variety of topics on which Americans and Canadians take idiosyncratic positions ranging from our curious choices of national symbols to semi-official national sports. Still, Canadian views on issues from water sales to election costs may baffle an outside observer. Why, for example, do Canadians obsess over water, remaining convinced that the United States wants to drain Canada to the last drop? Does this attitude suggest that we need serious bilateral discussion on future transborder water usage? What explains the Canadian affection for the goods and services tax? Why the penny-pinching calculation over costs of elections, criminal investigations, and trials? Is democracy supposed to be free, or investigation with trial expenses deliberately limited?

Annex

Presidents and Prime Ministers: Candid Views

During the past 25 years, we have had a healthy dollop of both the good and the not-so-good in our bilateral relationship. In the early 1990s, an observer could honestly say, with only minor caveats, that the bilateral relationship was “never better.” Subsequently, one had to refer to the statement that Canada and the United States are “best friends, like it or not.” From 2001 to 2008, we were largely in the “not” portion of that cycle. The 2008 election of President Barack Obama (and his 2012 reelection) has been a game changer—at least perceptually—and his conjunction with a quietly conservative government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper has minimized discord.

Otherwise, while leaders do not have to love, or even like, one another, watching their interactions often reflects underlying national attitudes: Mulroney-Reagan; Mulroney-Bush; Chrétien-Clinton-Bush; Martin-Bush; and now Harper-Obama. With some exceptions, relations have been “workmanlike,” and Canadians can be grateful that U.S. presidents have not taken occasional reflexive animosity personally.