

Peter Brimelow

The Maple Leaf For Ever?

A Short Guide to Canada



THE VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN Member of Parliament for Rocky Mountain in Alberta, Joe Clark, came to see me one winter afternoon in late 1975, at the Toronto offices of the *Financial Post*, Canada's main business newspaper, where I was then working. Clark was shortly to be nicknamed "Joe Who?" by the

Canadian media, a joke originally made about Spiro Agnew after he was nominated for US Vice-President in 1968—and an example of how even minor American quirks evoke sedulous (albeit unadmitted) imitation north of the border.

Clark was a candidate for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party, nominally the most Right-wing of the three basically indistinguishable parties in Canada's federal Parliament. But almost no one had noticed. That autumn, he had broken a previous appointment with me, pleading insufficient time to consult his economic advisors. (Economics is a stigma you have to accept when you write for a paper called the *Financial Post*.) Somewhat reluctantly, I began our rescheduled interview by asking him what he thought about the quasi-official Economic Council of Canada's new report, *Looking Outward*, which recommended free trade with the US and had therefore been widely denounced as advocating Canada's annexation by the dreaded Yankees. Clark immediately fell apart. Frankly, he said, he didn't know anything about economics—still—and his exhausting schedule wasn't helping. "You see", he added, "when I went into politics I had to choose between learning economics and learning French. And I chose French"

I was completely disarmed. Still pondering how I could possibly write up the incident without humiliating such a nice

and obviously harmless man, I went off to the Middle East to do a Special Report on the effects of the oil boom. The Report won a Canadian journalism award. Joe Clark won the Tory Leadership, and was subsequently to become Prime Minister of Canada.

Several morals can be extracted from this tale. One of them is the subtle but profoundly debilitating cost of the French connection to English Canadian public life. Politics is quite simply more important than economics in Canada, largely because of the opportunities for manipulation that this ethnic division offers to political entrepreneurs. Another is just how inexperienced Joe Clark was when he became Tory leader at the age of 36. For a practising politician to know nothing about what has historically been the central economic question facing his country may be less than surprising. (It is, though, mildly ironic in Clark's case because of the starring role he has more recently played as Foreign Minister in Brian Mulroney's government. Their efforts to reach a free trade agreement with the US were finally consummated after a federal election on the issue in 1988.) But to be unable to talk his way around such a question was a shocking breach of professional standards. Inexperienced leaders do surface in other countries (for example, President Jimmy Carter), but generally under unusual circumstances. In Canada they crop up with suspicious frequency—evidence, I believe, of profound structural flaws in Canada's institutions.

IN THE EARLY 1900s, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and others proclaimed that the 20th century would belong to Canada. Pierre Trudeau, more than 50 years later, held out the prospect of the country becoming "a brilliant prototype for the moulding of tomorrow's civilisation". But when I arrived in Canada in 1972, Canadians were reacting to such sentiments with quiet derision. And by the time Barry Bruce-Briggs and Marie-Josée Drouin were interviewing Canadian businessmen for one of Herman Kahn's Hudson Institute futurological surveys, they found their opening question so often volleyed right back at them in inverted form that only at the insistence of Kahn (a professional optimist) was the title of their book converted from a wry interrogative into an emphatic protestation: *Canada Has A Future*. . . .¹

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¹ Marie-Josée Drouin and Barry Bruce-Briggs, *Canada Has A Future* (1978).

Canada had of course been substantially spared the US recession of 1975-76, and Joe Clark's extraordinary admission came before the catastrophic recession of 1982-83—far deeper and longer in Canada than in the US—which so shook the country's political and business élites that they finally began to contemplate the free trade option. More immediately, it took place before the prolonged crisis over possible secession of the French-speaking province of Quebec that began when the separatist *Parti Québécois* won the provincial election of 1976.

THE CANADIAN CONUNDRUM is not just a matter of restive regions. More light is thrown upon it by asking a simple question: why is Canada poorer than the US? From Walter Gordon's Royal Commission in 1957 to comments in 1985 by Simon Reisman, Canada's negotiator in the recent free trade talks, semi-official estimates have placed Canada's standard-of-living at as low as 70% of the American level. Canadians seem to accept this, in their stoical way, as a sort of law of nature. But it isn't.

Canada's natural resources base is at least as good, particularly per capita, as that of the US; its people are conveniently concentrated in a few large cities; and the climate they face is little more severe than the northern tier of US states—"the Frost Belt". There is no disadvantage inherent in Canada's fundamental economic position that suitable policies, like free trade, could not correct. Moreover, Canada's population is homogeneous, without the Americans' intractable underclass problem, and Canada spends practically nothing on Defence, preferring to free-load on the American effort. Without these serious financial burdens, its living standard should actually be higher than that of its larger neighbour.

Canada could be a second Switzerland (which is also, after all, a rather cold place). It should be an oasis of prosperity and civilisation: what Ronald Reagan used to call "a city on a hill". But instead it more closely resembles sluggish, querulous, post-War Britain. It has even developed disturbing fiscal parallels with countries like Argentina and Uruguay, which at the beginning of the century stood with Canada on the threshold of development, only to diverge from it and decay into ignominious Third World status. (It now seems clear, for instance, that Canada has missed the chance to develop its high-cost energy resources in the High Arctic that was offered by the OPEC cartel's price hikes. This was entirely due to Ottawa's mismanagement; the price, however, will be paid mainly by Western Canada.)

This Canadian failure is, of course, not really a tragedy. Far worse things have happened to other successor states of the British Empire. Even in purely economic terms, Canada's record has been passable by world standards. The real disappointment is in comparison to what might have been. The fundamental reason for this chronic underper-

formance is that, to appropriate the famous phrase used by Professor (now Senator) Daniel Patrick Moynihan to explain the failure of American black families to work their way into the middle class, Canadian politics is embroiled in "a tangle of pathologies".

I will attempt to unravel the skein.

ALTHOUGH THE SMALL Canadian Studies industry in American universities and elsewhere rarely asks itself why Canada does not do better, it does sometimes approach the issue in a more tactful way—as befits a discipline that is pervasively beholden to Ottawa for financial support. Attention is drawn to the various differences between US and Canadian economic forms: the relatively greater share of Gross National Product taken by provincial governments in Canada; the existence of a "public enterprise tradition"; the much larger intra-regional transfer payments; the higher savings rate. These factors are often described as constituting the economic dimension of a unique Canadian "political culture".² In fact, Canada underperforms largely because of these differences in policy.

By contrast, the Canadian Question posed here is in the tradition of Goldwin Smith—Canada's pre-eminent Victorian intellectual, a British immigrant, former Regius Professor at Oxford, and a classical liberal like his fellow-Etonian William Ewart Gladstone. Smith's classic *Canada and the Canadian Question* appeared in 1891.³ Any talk of a unique Canadian culture, economic or otherwise, inspired him to derision. "The two sections of the English-speaking race on the American continent", he pointed out, "... are in a state of economic, intellectual and social fusion, daily becoming more complete." Indeed, Smith's Canadian Question was whether Canada could—or should—survive at all.

These views have made Goldwin Smith something of an unperson among Canadian intellectuals heavily influenced since the 1960s by a form of "Canadian Nationalism" that is basically a local variant of international Left-wing and anti-American attitudes. But although the verdict may not yet be in on his prediction that Canada will ultimately join with the United States, he certainly appears to have been highly prescient in other areas, notably in his contention that the French of Quebec would never assimilate and would always present Canada with a political problem. Above all, his answer to the problem of Canada's persistent underperformance, arising from his classical liberal assumptions, remains strikingly valid today: "'Rich By Nature, Poor By Policy' might be written over Canada's door."

ONE OF Winston Churchill's methods of running Britain at war was periodically to demand from his cowering subordinates an account of what was happening in some area or another, "on one half of a sheet of notepaper". He found that this concentrated their minds on essentials. Despite Smith's precedent, my own analysis of Canada may seem unfamiliar, disorienting, and even fantastic to those accustomed to the more comforting conventional view. So my essential argument is compressed into a handy outline guide.

² See, for example, Herschel Hardin, *A Nation Unaware: The Canadian Economic Culture* (1974).

³ Ninety-five years later, I subtitled my own book on Canada in homage to it.

1. CANADA—to paraphrase Metternich—is merely a geographical expression. For historical reasons, Canada has acquired the legal form of a nation-state, but it is not a nation. Culturally and even spatially, its Anglophone and Francophone communities are growing more separate each year. There are around six million Francophones,⁴ about a quarter of Canada's population. All but some half-million live in the province of Quebec, which they totally control. This physical separation of Anglophone and Francophone is becoming steadily more acute. The number of Francophones living outside Quebec and the number of Anglophones inside Quebec are falling not merely in proportional but in absolute terms.

Official defenders of Canada's current order have developed two techniques to finesse this embarrassing reality. Firstly, they assert in the face of all evidence to the contrary that the oil and water of French and English have indeed mixed—"... there is really no discontinuity between them, they can be seen as a single entity", as Pierre Trudeau brazenly assured a banquet in honour of Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Canada in 1976.

Secondly, they talk of "Canada" while ignoring Quebec altogether. A fine example of this was the essay "Signing Away Canada's Soul: Culture, Identity and the Free Trade Movement", published in the January 1989 issue of *Harper's Magazine* by Robertson Davies, perhaps Canada's most eminent novelist. Davies's omission of Quebec was particularly inappropriate because the Quebec élite were solidly in favour of free trade, viewing the idea of a distinctive Canadian Anglophone culture with incredulity; and the province's vote had tipped the balance in the 1988 election.

Goldwin Smith was aware of both tricks, as he showed in discussing a precursor of "Canadian Nationalism", the "Canada First" movement of the 1870s:

"Enthusiasm was blind to the difficulty presented to the devotees of Canadian nationality by the separate nationality of Quebec, or if it was not blind, succeeded in cajoling itself by poetic talk about the value of French gifts and grace as ingredients for combination, without asking itself whether fusion was not the thing the French most abhorred."

2. THERE ARE at least two and conceivably seven incipient nations within Canada. By far the most important division is that between English and French Canada. But there are lesser distinctions within English Canada: Ontario; the West (with or without the sub-section of British Columbia, beyond the Rockies); the Maritime provinces on the Eastern seaboard (with or with-

out the sub-section of Newfoundland, formerly a separate British colony); and the native-dominated North. These areas differ economically and culturally in significant respects, often echoing similar sectionalisms to those noted south of the border in the US. All these divisions constitute political fault-lines underlying the Canadian polity.

Sheer size poses a more serious political problem for Canada than is generally recognised. Human communities are centrifugal in tendency, and it has been the exception rather than the rule for the great overseas possessions of the European imperial powers to retain political unity after independence. Spanish America, only a million square miles or so larger than Canada's 3.6 million, has fragmented into fifteen different countries; and even the proverbially lucky Australians suffered a crisis in the 1930s, when Western Australia voted to secede. A similar torsion is continuously at work in Canadian politics.

3. WITHIN THE Canadian framework Quebec is emerging as a genuine nation-state. History does not move in straight lines. There is a cyclical rhythm to Francophone nationalism, as well as a rising long-run secular trend. Every downturn is greeted with renewed complacency in English Canada. But the ratchet-wheel of Francophone power never goes into reverse. The last quarter-century of turmoil has left the Francophones in complete institutional control of Quebec, which is now regarded by all segments of French opinion as their political expression.

This amounts to a repudiation of the life-work of Pierre Trudeau, former Prime Minister and leader of the federal Liberal Party from 1968-84. Trudeau was a Quebec Francophone, but he was also a man of the Left and deeply suspicious of Quebec nationalism, apparently because of his experiences with the reactionary Quebec governments of his youth. Trudeau imposed radical reforms on Canada with the intention of institutionalising a bilingual, bicultural society precisely in order that the *Québécois* should view Canada as a whole, rather than Quebec, as their political expression.

His reforms can now be seen to have failed utterly. When Prime Minister Brian Mulroney concluded the so-called "Meech Lake Accord" with the provinces in 1987, he supposedly ended the round of constitutional negotiations begun in the effort to keep Quebec from voting for the *Parti Québécois*'s proposal in the 1980 referendum, which sought a mandate to negotiate "sovereignty in association". Mulroney accepted this failure by formally recognising Quebec as "a distinct society", with a special responsibility for Francophones. English Canada, however, is still supposed to bear the very substantial cost of the Trudeau-era institutions.

In Ottawa jargon, the "*deux nations*" concept of Canada has triumphed posthumously over the view of Quebec as "*une province comme les autres*". From retirement, Pierre Trudeau has, not surprisingly, denounced the Meech Lake Accord as representing a "fast track" to Quebec's separation. The Accord, which has several other aspects, will expire if it is not ratified by all the provinces—supposedly in 1990, although Ottawa has recently been shuffling its feet on this point. Several provinces are holding out against it, citing

⁴ Ottawa's official jargon has now generally replaced the terms "French" and "English". There are also "Endophones" (previously known as Indians and Eskimos, and sometimes now as "native peoples") and "Allophones" (immigrants who speak neither English nor French). This can fuzz Canadian language statistics. Most Allophones eventually become Anglophones, so that this term (like the American "Anglo") now covers many people not of British origin, although about half of all Canadians still are.

various reasons. To some extent, Meech Lake has become a lightning-rod for discontent with Brian Mulroney's government (currently running third in the political opinion polls), and with Canada's current order in general.

As if the revival of Quebec separatism wasn't enough, the Reform Party, a genuinely Right-wing group with particularist if not separatist leanings, has recently begun winning elections in Western Canada, the vast area stretching from beyond the Great Lakes to the Pacific, where discontent with Canada's Quebec-focused politics is coming to the boil. And there are only ten years of the 20th century to go.

This discontent was violently exacerbated by the latest jerk of the Quebec ratchet. After years of litigation, the Supreme Court of Canada finally struck down some of the legislation initiated by the *Parti Québécois*, which, as part of its campaign to make the province a unilingual French society, was moving to suppress the public use of English in Quebec. That province's Liberal government (the Liberals succeeded the *Parti Québécois* after the failure of the 1980 referendum) promptly used powers acquired during the constitutional negotiations to over-ride the Supreme Court's decision. In the curious way that these things happen, this move seems to have finally brought home to many English Canadians the obvious truth that Quebec is simply not playing the bi-national game, that its entire political élite is crypto-separatist.

After the 1988 Quebec provincial election, in which a revived *Parti Québécois* put on a strong performance, Quebec's Liberal Premier, Robert Bourassa, said publicly that remaining in Canada was not Quebec's only "external option". If the Meech Lake Accord was not ratified, he implied, this would produce a separatist convulsion in Quebec. If the Accord is ratified, however, Quebec will acquire further powers to continue its slow secession. . . . From English Canada's point of view, there is a high road and a low road, but they both lead to the same place.

4. ANGLOPHONE CANADA is essentially part of a larger English-speaking North American national culture. Despite frequent assertions to the contrary, English Canada's political, economic and social culture differs from that of the US only in degree, not in kind. It forms a distinct section, like the American South or (probably the closest comparison) Pacific North-west, with its own flavour and nuances but nevertheless sharing a common culture. However, the Canadian Studies industry and conventional wisdom throughout Canada (a considerable force) maintain that Canada has its own "culture" which is quite different from that of the US, despite superficial similarities.⁵ The effect of differing policies and institutions is usually ignored.

⁵ A popular statement of this view is found in Pierre A. Berton, *Why We Act Like Canadians* (1982).

⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Cultural Dimension", in Charles Doran and John H. Sigler (eds), *Canada and the United States: Enduring Friendship, Persistent Stress* (1985).

⁷ Thomas Sowell, *The Economics and Politics of Race* (1983).

⁸ Alain Peyrefitte, *The Trouble With France* (1981).

⁹ W. N. A. Carr, *From Three Cents a Week: The Story of the Prudential Insurance Company* (1975).

Attempts have even been made to demonstrate this empirically, through polling data, which typically aggregate French and English Canadian responses, blurring their systemic differences. Similarly, US data such as crime rates are often used for the purposes of demonstrating differences between the two nations, without any allowance for the heterogeneous elements of US society, some of which are responsible for wholly disproportionate amounts of crime. Significantly, Seymour Martin Lipset, whose polling work has been much cited in this context, has recently refined his position to take account of the English-French dichotomy: "The evidence indicates that Francophone Canadians vary more from their Anglophone conationals than the latter do from Americans."⁶

A true comparison would be between the core English-speaking populations of the two nations, allowing for sectional location—and with wholly foreign cultures, such as those of Italy or India. Like the famous half-full or half-empty glass of water, the question of whether the US and Canada are fundamentally alike is vitally affected by perspective. But Canadian Anglophone intellectuals are usually fairly ignorant of international comparisons. And a good few simply want to break the glass.

Of course, culture does matter—it does affect economic forms, and often in astonishingly pervasive fashion, as Thomas Sowell has demonstrated in his studies of ethnic groups in the US and elsewhere.⁷ Alain Peyrefitte, for example, in his study of the economic culture of France, specifically singled out the Quebec Francophones' lack of success as a transatlantic expression of *le mal français*: "Their troubles stem less from law or politics than from [their own] attitudes."⁸ And in 1973, the historian of the Prudential Insurance Company of Newark, New Jersey, noted with bafflement the extraordinary reluctance of Francophone workers to accept transfers out of their community, even when they could easily have commuted to a new job from their present homes.⁹ However, it is between the Francophones and Anglophones of North America, whether Canadian or American, that the real cultural divide occurs.

In 1982 Pierre Trudeau scheduled three televised Prime Ministerial "fireside chats" on the subject of Canada's economy. He appeared at 7.30 p.m. in Central Canada, Quebec, and Ontario, which of course meant a rush-hour 5.30 in Alberta and an impossible workday afternoon 4.30 in British Columbia. But then, Trudeau was always famously insensitive to the West—one historian of the Liberal Party has even claimed that when Trudeau became Prime Minister he had never been west of Toronto. On this occasion, though, there was an excuse: a later scheduling would have put Trudeau in conflict with baseball's World Series on the American border TV stations. In such moments of truth, Canadian politicians have no doubts about the cultural identity of their flock.

5. CANADA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM is badly designed, and seriously misrepresents Canadian reality. The most important flaw is the lack of effective regional balance, which has allowed interest groups in the central

Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario to dominate the Confederation. But specific institutional factors are responsible for many Canadian political characteristics which are conventionally attributed to Canada's unique (i.e., "un-American") political culture.

For practical purposes, Canada at a national level is a unitary state. Contemplate the fact that, if the US had had Canada's political institutions in the Presidential election years of 1984 and 1988, the American Prime Minister would have been Representative Jim Wright (Democrat: Texas). In 1980, furthermore, the Prime Minister would have been Tip O'Neil. Wright and O'Neil were leaders of the Party that won a majority in the US House of Representatives, which, like the Canadian House of Commons, is composed of equal-sized, single-member districts elected on the first-past-the-post system. Both legislatures take account solely of population, and the cities of the East (in Canada's case, Quebec and Ontario) therefore outweigh the vast spaces of the West.

The American founding fathers were keenly aware of the danger of domination by a majority region, and tried to counter it by creating the Senate, to which each state elects two members regardless of population. American federalism is not merely a question of glorified local government: it actually allows the regions to project power in the federal capital. By contrast, Canadian federalism has powerful provinces, but the Canadian Senate is appointive and has become moribund. There is no effective recognition at federal level of Canada's discrete regional communities, and the interests of specific regions are consistently overlooked, where they are not actually abused.

Thus the National Energy Programme imposed by the federal Liberals in 1981 aborted Western Canada's energy boom. And the fishing industry's low priority in Ottawa, reflected in Canada's slowness to proclaim a 200-mile territorial limit, has resulted in its atrophy. The descent into welfare dependency of the island province of Newfoundland (which entered Confederation only in 1949) is in stark contrast to the economic success of the very similarly situated island of Iceland (which after World War II chose not to renew its continental links with Denmark).

6. THE POLITICAL SYSTEM and Canada's deep divisions, particularly its linguistic disjunctions, have facilitated the growth of an unusually powerful public class. This élite, an unusually healthy specimen of what Irving Kristol has called "the New Class", mediates across Canada's various divisions, and invents policies that advantage itself and its clients.

The study of Canada has been greatly benefited by the development of the "Public Choice" school of economics, for which Professor James Buchanan of George Mason University was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1986. Basically, Public Choice analyses government activity in terms of the economic interests of the respective actors, instead of assuming that policies are necessarily conceived and implemented "in the public interest". Professor Gordon Tullock of the University of Arizona has identified the particularly valuable

concept of "rent-seeking"—the use of political power to extract benefits from the economic process.

The political economy of Canada can be summarised simply, if crudely. A Central Canadian élite, extracting "rents" from a rich, resource-based economy, struggles to quieten peripheral protest in three distinctive ways: by coercion—voting down regional opposition in Parliament, as with the National Energy Programme; by bribery—extensive inter-regional transfer payments, under such rubrics as "Welfare" or "Economic Development" (because of the opportunity cost of other Ottawa policies, of course, this amounts to bribing the regions with their own money); and by conning—persuading the regions of the legitimacy of the rent-seeking activity.

ALTHOUGH justified as a "nationalist" measure aimed at foreign (mainly US) oil companies, the NEP is an outstanding example of this phenomenon. It effectively expropriated the windfall profits which accrued to Western Canada's hydrocarbon resources during the "Energy Crisis", concentrating them in Ottawa's hands and redirecting them to clients like Central Canadian consumers, who benefited from energy prices held below world levels. Historically, perhaps the most notorious rent-seeking policy was Canada's long-standing protectionism, which benefited Quebec and Ontario manufacturers at the expense of economic activity in the periphery. A more modern example is "multiculturalism"—a range of government policies, ostensibly designed to help immigrant groups maintain their heritage, which actually legitimises the stimulation and purchase of professional ethnic leaders and their constituencies with tax dollars. Canadians are frequently informed that "multiculturalism" is an expression of their unique political culture. But it is in fact quite new—and has cropped up at about the same time in the US and throughout the English-speaking world.

In terms of post-Trudeau Canada, the most remarkable Public Choice phenomenon is the imposition of official bilingualism upon the federal Civil Service, and as far as possible throughout the whole of public life. Its practical effect is to mandate the preferment of bilingual personnel. Since Canada is not remotely bilingual or bicultural, this amounts to a supreme act of social engineering which materially benefits the 16% of Canada's population—two-thirds of them Francophones, and almost all Central Canadians—who can speak both languages.

Unilinguals are second-class citizens in Canada. Only bilinguals, for example, can hope for full careers in the Civil Service—and Canada is a country with pervasive government on the European social-democratic model. Official bilingualism also significantly enhances the power of the quite atypical segments of Canadian society from which the bilinguals tend to be drawn—the Francophones; the Anglophone remnant in the Quebec metropolis of Montreal; the established (and hence educated) upper middle classes; and Central Canada in general. Not coincidentally, the position of all of these groups turns out to be otherwise threatened by demographic trends. The proportion of Francophones in the population is falling, and may be as low as 20% by the end of the century; while the burgeoning of Western

Canada is upstaging all aspects of the Central Canadian Establishment.

In the political arena, the perceived need to have a French-speaking leader has seriously reduced the options open to the essentially-Anglophone Progressive Conservative Party. Bilingualism was the principal (and arguably the only) asset of Brian Mulroney, who had never held office or indeed fought an election until he became Tory leader, displacing Joe Clark, in 1983. Indeed, Canada's current political order is so focused on Quebec that it appears that any potential Prime Minister must be bilingual and hail from that province, preferably from those rare circumstances where the two societies—the Francophone and the Anglophone—have interacted to the point where he can “pass” as a member of either. Supply of such cultural hermaphrodites is limited—but Mulroney and Trudeau, accentless in both languages, are examples.

Official bilingualism has its comic aspects. The spectacle of signs and announcements zealously duplicated in French in Western Canadian airports, although no one in the teeming crowds understands the language, is reminiscent of those bowls of milk which Irish peasants used to leave on the doorstep to placate the phantom nation of Little People with whom they believed they shared their land. But in Canada the policy has committed Ottawa to a course that will increasingly collide with the political culture of English-speaking North America, with its minimal class distinctions, high social mobility, and determination of status by private activity rather than public prescription.

The typical American political career begins in mid-life—witness Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan. Anglophone Canadians will be unable to replicate this, unless they are atypical *apparatchiks* like Joe Clark, who has spent virtually his entire adult life in various political jobs, and has in effect been coopted into the Ottawa milieu. Conversely, the fact that the federal Civil Service is the only part of Canadian society which remotely approaches the bilingual and bicultural ideal accentuates its isolation and its distinct tendency to believe, like the Prussian Army, that it is the supreme repository of national values.

7. THE CANADIAN PUBLIC CLASS has developed what Marxists call a “dominant ideology” which rationalises and justifies its own power. It has been quite successful in imposing this ideology as the Canadian conventional wisdom. Basically amounting to the direct opposite of everything I have asserted, the ideology has historically been identified with the federal Liberal Party. But Brian Mulroney has made a determined effort to hijack it, rather as the British “Butskellites” or the American liberal Republican practitioners of “Me-Tooism” did in the 1950s. One of its important radical mutations is Canadian Nationalism.

In political terms, the Liberal ideology has functioned as a dominant ideology in the sense defined by Antonio Gramsci. By establishing its hegemony, it has served to legitimise Ottawa's policies and to suppress challenges to them. Official bilingualism, for example, has been effectively kept out of politics by a consensus among the major parties

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that to question the issue in public would quite simply be immoral. Richard Gwyn, formerly the distinguished Ottawa correspondent of the *Toronto Star*, and a supporter of the policy, has admitted this frankly in his biography of Trudeau:

“Bilingualism, in truth, was nothing less than a social revolution. Like the introduction of the welfare state, like the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s, it was a development that effected fundamental change in the character of the country. But in contrast to those transformational phenomena, no one in authority in Ottawa in the late 1960s and early 1970s let on that massive change was about to happen.”¹⁰

Similarly, the Progressive Conservatives have been deterred from the obvious electoral strategy of uniting their natural Anglophone supporters while writing off the Francophones—a clear route to victory, since the Anglophones constitute 75% of the population. Instead, they have persisted in playing down Anglophone concerns in an attempt to break into the Francophone stronghold of Quebec. Brian Mulroney has explicitly shied away from radical reform on the Reagan or Thatcher models because of the belief that Canada is somehow “different”.

8. CANADIAN POLITICS is deceptively volatile. The present political order is not particularly secure. Although for long influential in Canada, the Liberal ideology only finally established its hegemony in the 1960s. The full effects of Trudeau’s transformation of Canada’s institutions have not yet been felt, and may well prove to be merely a transitional phase.

The most obvious symptom of volatility, of course, has been rumblings and grumbings along regional fault-lines, not merely in Quebec but in Western Canada. Political scientists have also found it significant that—exceptionally

among countries with a similar electoral system—Canada has never evolved an unequivocal two-party system at the federal level. Instead, there have been repeated third- (and even fourth-) party insurrections. Further evidence of ferment shows in the sudden triumph of bilateral free trade with the US. Despite its inherent logic, free trade was so contrary to the conventional wisdom as late as 1983 that in the Tory leadership race of that year Brian Mulroney denounced the very idea, and fiercely attacked a rival who dared to raise the matter.

Quebec has always been the obvious flashpoint of Canadian politics, but in future the West may be a candidate. The reason is demographic. In 1901, the four Western provinces constituted only about 10% of Canada’s population; in the East, Ontario had 40%, Quebec 30%, and the Maritimes 20%. But by 1981, the West had risen to claim 27% of the population, for the first time exceeding Quebec, which was left with 26%. Ontario had just under 37%, and the Maritimes passed into insignificance, with only 10%.

Canadian politics, then, is becoming a three-actor system. Previously, Ontario and Quebec between them could dominate Canada. Increasingly, it will be possible for either to break away and govern Canada in alliance with the West. Indeed, this new system was already visible in the 1988 election. Ontario, as represented by its provincial government and by much of the Toronto media élite, opposed free trade. But the Quebec élite—once again showing its independence—and the West did not. This proved decisive. At some point in the future, the booming West may be able to force through fundamental institutional change.

The story of Canada contains a number of themes common in the latter half of the 20th century. There is the intractability of nationalism, as evidenced in Quebec’s steady rise to sovereign status. There is the rise of “the New Class” as a powerful interest group, with its apparent ability to create facts (such as an official Canada that is more or less bilingual), and the ultimate failure of this sort of social engineering to overcome intractable reality.

Finally, there is that peculiar malaise which has overcome other parts of the English-speaking world: the conviction that the only legitimate expression of its identity lies in subordinating itself to others. . . .

¹⁰ Richard Gwyn, *The Northern Magus: Pierre Trudeau and the Canadians* (1981).

A Pastoral Escapist’s Valediction

But it would be very damp, you said:
Yes it would, on an excessively green
Slope of Devon clay, with the thatch
Rain-black, the low-browed sun-denying
Windows and that crooked orchard
Closing in.

What did we really fear—
That settled here we would live out
A hollow pastoral, unable to keep
Erect among its bent labouring ghosts?

Too sentimental: all that mattered was,
It was just our turn, for a brief stay,
To walk consciously where they plodded
On the rural roundabout, apt to break back
Or heart if you try to wrest from it
More than it can give: a daffodil slope
Hurts the heart with desiring too much
Merely of things that grow in the soil:
The blue-flashing machine is at the gate—
It was never, you knew, a complete retreat.

Michael Thorpe