

## Reflections On Canadian National Identity – An Essay By Alexander Pilic

Living in Canada for a couple of years now, Canadians have been trying to do a pretty good job in explaining to me that many things in Canada are SO much better than in the States. I met only few Canadians who considered their country and the United States as more or less two things of the same kind, just as I did when I came here from Europe but many more who almost felt insulted when I – asked for my view as an outsider – argued that there are not too many obvious differences between the two countries. While it may be true that many Americans are indifferent towards Canada and might not even know that the Raptors are not an American basketball team, I started wondering what remains from the “Canadian national identity” if one takes out the “American factor” defining how Canadians do NOT want to be. Is there a Canadian national identity at all?

Just a few examples:

–In Niagara Falls, Ontario, across from Niagara Falls, New York, vendors sell Canadian souvenirs to the many visitors from all over the world. On one of the T-shirts on display it says: “Canadians are Americans without guns but with healthcare”

–During the 2008 election campaign, political opponents of Prime Minister Stephen Harper depicted the conservative politician with an American flag right across his face in order to suggest that he is too pro-American to run Canada

–My former landlord, a liberal Quaker and follower of the peace-movement once stated proudly that “...the average conservative Canadian has more liberal stands on issues than the average liberal American”

Still, tens of thousands of Canadians cross the border to the U.S. in order to shop, watch sports games or even work “down south”. Stephen Harper’s conservatives won the elections competing against two rather liberal parties which like to point out that they are not supporting “American” values. And whether they are liberal or conservative, the lifestyle of most Canadians does not seem to be very different from their American counterparts. Nevertheless, many Canadians apparently feel that they need to draw a clear line between themselves and their American neighbors, even if it is only a Canadian flag on their backpacks while they are travelling:

As a native German, it was not unusual for me to see people from the smaller neighbor countries like Austria, Switzerland, Luxembourg or to some extent Netherlands trying to stick out their national identity in order to be not confused with Germans. But I do not recall seeing flocks of Austrian or Luxembourgian tourists with their national flag posted on their luggage...

When I came to Canada, I worked in tourism and this was a good place to discover how Canadians like to present themselves to the world. Operating guided tours to places like Kingston, Ontario or Niagara-On-The-Lake, brought me right away to a key moment in Canadian history: The British-American War of 1812, which was fought mainly along today’s Canadian-American border between Detroit and Montreal. In Europe, I never heard anything in school or university about this war, but it seems to be essential in Canadian history books.

## Reflections On Canadian National Identity – An Essay By Alexander Pilic

Although this war was between the United States and the British Empire and its main cause was a trade-dispute between Washington and London over France, it created a unique identity among inhabitants of Britain's colonies north of the Great Lakes and is still perceived by many Canadians today as an attack on them and a sign of the dangerous American expansionism. How could that happen?

After the Independence War, many loyalists to the crown fled north where the British army retreated to. This region was almost unsettled and only after the American Revolution the British began to put more attention to the area which is today known as Canada. The US declared war on Britain because the empire was fighting against France, at that time an ally of Washington – and because Britain wanted to deter the US from trading with France. When President Madison decided to go to war, the attack on British forces in Canada was a mean of weakening the British position in general, not so much with the objective to seize the land. Eventually, the war from 1812 ended 3 years later without significant territorial gains or losses:

The Americans gained fishing-rights in the St. Lawrence Gulf but Britain who withstood the American attack by bringing more than 40,000 additional troops to Canada, remained in North America. The U.S. was able to prove that they were eye to eye with the world's most powerful country of the time, but at the same time the war created the groundwork for a common identity of crown-loyal settlers in Canada and awareness among the British that they had to compete with the Americans from now on.

The “American factor” is said to have been significant for the Queen to choose Ottawa as a capital for the colony because it was not as vulnerable to possible American attacks as Toronto or Montreal were. In order to keep Canada loyal to the crown, London encouraged settlement and finally decided to give the country its independence by an act of British Parliament in 1867. This decision was initiated by several factors: As their neighbors in the States had done years earlier, there were several small uprisings in Canada against the British elite demanding more autonomy in the 1830s and 40s. Besides, Britain was able to negotiate a border agreement with the U.S. in the Oregon Treaty and therefore was interested in building a large federal state in order to consolidate its influence in North America and to contain the flux of cross-border settling.

The foundation of Canada, it seems, was rather a political strategy to secure the boundaries of the British Empire than the heroic birth of a nation! However, the spirit of competition between north and south of the 48<sup>th</sup> parallel continued after Canada's formal semi-independence in 1867, for example with regard to building a transcontinental railroad line. The American success to finish several railway-lines to the Pacific motivated the Canadian government to press ahead with a railroad on Canadian territory.

Ottawa was afraid that the American railroad would bring more settlers who would eventually cross the border and also British Columbia was demanding the connection with the east of the country. And until today, there is some kind of fear among Canadian politicians that the westernmost provinces could drift into the sphere of US influence because they have more in common with the American states of the northwest than with the “old” Canada in the east.

## Reflections On Canadian National Identity – An Essay By Alexander Pilic

Richard Gwyn, a Canadian author writing in a publication for Toronto's Munk Centre For International Studies, argues that the first prime minister Macdonald is the founding father of Canada because he withstood the temptation to join the U.S. when Canada began to loosen ties to Britain. Strangely enough, Macdonald's political credo was, "A British subject I was born, a British subject I will die"(!). Gwyn points out that the loyalty to Britain helped to develop a Canadian identity but he does not say what exactly this Canadian identity is made of – apart from not being Americans.

When asked for distinctive Canadian virtues, there are a number of points which are repeatedly made: According to the research results of Anthony Wilson-Smith, Canadians describe the character of their country with a "tendency towards non-violence", tolerance, social security and stability and a "non-violent approach". All this might be true but it could also be said in its entirety about Scandinavians or the Dutch and partially about many other nationalities like Costa Ricans, New Zealanders, and even about Germans and Japanese after the Second World War.

To make things worse, not even the argument of being a Non-American seems to be convincing to many Canadians themselves: Almost half of Canadians would consider to live in the States rather than in another part of Canada! On the other hand, civic pride in national institutions like government, culture, military and sports is widespread in Canada, more than in any other country of the world. Guess who scored second in civic pride – Yes, the Americans!

In fact, Canadians share much more things with the Americans than they are willing to admit: High levels of energy consumption, the great outdoors, "American sports", a society built on immigration and multi-ethnicity, a free market system and cities designed for car-drivers, just to name a few things randomly. Americans imprisoned Japanese during World War II, Canadians did the same with Germans during World War I. Blacks are overrepresented among the prison population in the U.S., in Canada the Natives take this place. – Shall I continue?

One problem of Canadian national identity can be observed nowhere better than in the entertainment industry. The "conscious Canadian" tends to criticize the influence of American pop-culture – like many people around the world do by the way. A closer look at this pop-culture reveals that many of the artists, songs, movies or TV-shows are Canadian or have at least some Canadian reference, because many American productions are shot in Canada.

Lots of Canadian singers became part of the American way of entertainment, which is true for many artists from around the world. The Beatles and The Stones are still British and U2 Irish in spite of their success in the U.S. But what have Steppenwolf, The Guess Who and Bryan Adams in common? They became iconic symbols of American pop-music, although they are Canadian. After becoming successful they are not recognized anymore as Canadians but Americans, even by many Canadians themselves!

## Reflections On Canadian National Identity – An Essay By Alexander Pilic

The good news is that Canada does not stand alone in his struggle to defend herself against the cultural American invasion. In many other countries this influence is perceived as a threat to their own culture, traditions or identity. But the cultural invasion is so diverse that it is difficult to build up a wall against it, especially because many people all over the world simply like many of those things coming from America. What makes everything more difficult for Canada is that it is so close to the U.S., geographically and culturally.

Still, Canada is not alone; it has two siblings with a similar history: Two countries sent into independence by Britain about a hundred years ago, still under Queen Elizabeth's reign, relying on immigration and today embracing multi-cultural, multi-lateral and progressive ideas as a national agenda. Since they are far away from the States, their need to distance themselves from America is not as strong as in Canada but the lack of a deep-rooted national identity can be felt there, too.

The talk is about Australia and New Zealand which appear sometimes as desperate as Canada in search of a clear definition of national identity and symbolism. Who would not know that Australia has Crocodile Dundee and Kangaroos, New Zealand its famous Rugby team with their Maori cry and the Canadians have ice-hockey! Apart from this, the Canucks are even better off than the Aussies and the Kiwis, because the Canadian national flag is well-known around the world and distinguishes Canada clearly from America and also Britain. Not only can Australia's and New Zealand's flag easily be confused, they also clearly bear the Union Jack, the symbol of the old motherland, which fuels discussions about whether to abandon the flags with British reference recently.

There's no way back to Britain for those countries but the question is what is lying ahead. The multi-cultural approach might be less offending for others than a specific national agenda, but how do you stick out in a multi-polar world without polarizing? Not to define a national frame is the easy way but is it also the high road? America channeled her multi-cultural, multi-ethnic body with a national agenda from the beginning. This national agenda transformed into a consensus of what is American or not.

Although this consensus is discriminating at times, it is being reframed over and over again and it eventually serves to build up a strong national identity among Americans. What can Canada learn from this? Of course it should not just copy the American way, but it should rebuild the way it defines herself.

### **1. Embrace what you are and not what you were or what you do not want to be like!**

Canadians are North Americans just like the people in the States. You have much more in common with them than with the British who only gave you formal independence in order not to lose you entirely. Think positively about what makes Canada unique and carry it out into the world!

# Reflections On Canadian National Identity – An Essay By Alexander Pilic

## 2. Give the modern Canada a Face in the world!

The maple-leaf national flag was a good start and the whole world knows the CN Tower. It's time to rebrand Canada: Confederation Bridge, the cross on top of Mont Royal, the Olympic Stadiums in Montreal and Calgary, ski-lifts in Banff, wineries and farms in the Okanagan and the Vancouver Harbor are just some of many great national icons Canada could use to promote itself.

## 3. Highlight the People, their lives and their achievements!

The RCMP and lumberjacks are fine but also Inuits on snowmobiles, snowboarders in the Rockies, office-workers in Toronto, Musicians in Montreal, Oil-sand workers in Alberta, Asian and South Asian business-owners in Vancouver, ice truck drivers in the NWT, Farmers in Saskatchewan, floatplane-pilots in Manitoba and shipyard-workers in the Maritimes are part of the Canadian national heritage

## 4. Institutionalize the modern Canada!

– Ottawa is a really nice place but how can you be independent if your government sits on a Capitol Hill looking like Westminster? Make Montreal Canada's official capital and even if not all of the government agencies are moving there it makes a far better impression on international guests than the ode to English architecture named Ottawa. Still, both cities are not too far from each other to keep some ministries working in Ottawa but the prime-minister and the into a full head of state turned General Governor should reside in Montreal!

– Make French and English obligatory to students in schools in all parts of the country! What would be a better sign of a Canadian national identity than a fully bilingual population?

– Change the constitution and ensure that Quebec is treated as a regular province with all privileges and all duties! As soon as Quebec becomes independent it is only a matter of time before Alberta applies for statehood in the U.S. and this will be the end of Canada!

– Convert all territories into full provinces and make the Exploration of the Arctic "Wild" North part of the Canadian National Agenda: The Arctic is a huge challenge effecting many aspects of human life: Settlements, industrial exploration, environmental issues, traditions of aboriginals, tourism, commerce, agriculture and much more. Canada could have a global impact on major decisions and developments in this area.

– Emphasize your partnership with the United States rather than the differences. This will encourage Americans to accept Canada more as a global partner and could eliminate the widespread indifference towards Canada. Thus, Canada could also become a much stronger pillar for transatlantic relations.

All those are not new ideas fallen from the skies but they could help Canada to develop what it seems to be longing for: A national identity to make this country and its people unmistakably unique in the world!