**What** **Makes A Nation: Canada in the 21st Century**

The question of what constitutes a nation has interested me since I began to study political science as part of my undergraduate degree. For Canadians, this has always seemed a vexing issue: are we one nation, “indivisible under God”, as the Americans like to proclaim? Are we a European settler nation of two founding peoples, as was established under the terms of the Confederation Act of 1867? If so, what of the myriad aboriginal tribes and races who peopled the land long before the arrival of the Vikings on the northern edge of Newfoundland? As with the status of Transylvanian Hungarians, can a people ever truly be considered to have switched their national affiliation without assimilation? Are such peoples doomed to be the unlucky subordinates of history? And if, within the nation which governs their behaviour and regulates their citizenship, each of these subordinated peoples comes to be called a “nation”, as in the case of the Québecois and Canada’s aboriginal peoples, does the entire concept of nationhood become so hopelessly adulterated as to lose any coherent meaning?

For philosophers such as Talleyrand and Schiller the term “nation” was always more than a neat encapsulation of political systems within fixed boundaries. For Talleyrand nations made up the citizenry of a larger global polity. With the right to nationhood came rights, but also responsibilities, not only to one’s own citizens but to the wider community of nations. The outward looking nation sought congress with other national entities for the betterment of all through trade. Schiller’s vision of a nation, embodied in his ideal of a national theatre, was no less visionary but looked more inward than outward for the roots of national identity. In a universal brotherhood of humankind, each race of people must define itself in order to better serve the aims of the Creator. Each individual within that nation must challenge themselves to live the ideals of brotherhood.

Over the years the ideas of Schiller and Talleyrand have been appropriated and applied in ways both constructive and destructive. In the history of western nations many states have gone to war to establish or defend their status as nations, contradicting Schiller’s notion of a universal brotherhood, at least insofar as fratricide cannot generally be considered brotherly behaviour. The definition of who may be considered one’s brother shifts according to alliances and pacts, like fractious boys in a schoolyard massing against a weaker prey or competing girls congregating to ostracise a rival. Thus, along with the idea of a shifting but defined *inside*, the nation today has come to be considered an agent of acquisition, and a commodity tempered in the forges of violence. For can something be truly valuable of one has not fought for it?

In this respect Canadianists find themselves awkwardly explaining how Canadians have fought bravely many times, but never to defend Canada. They look for a Canadian identity in the origin of its people but find instead a crude inter-mixing of diasporas and marginalised indigenes. The nation status of Canada is organised around events, such as the establishment of British North America Act of 1841, Confederation in 1867, the instituting of a Constitution and a Bill of Rights in the 1980s; but these events are not venerated or even typically remembered by most Canadians, and they are contradicted by Canada’s long lingering colonial status, its piecemeal accommodation of new territories, and the fact that its political system is not representative of its people either in terms of its gender balance and make-up of ethnicities but with regard to its primarily urban demographic make-up.

South of the longest undefended border in the world, the Americans have never held any doubt as to their nationhood. A nation of newcomers striving after an ideal of a democratic state, they ruthlessly appropriated territory and eliminated the people living on it. The American Dream of the 20th century included, amongst its conditions, unquestioning adherence to the idea of the cultural “melting pot”, where’s one’s ethnic identity was checked at the border. Ferenc Szabó became Frank Taylor, the *Nagy* family became the Nagy’s and generations of Italians, Poles, and Ukrainians watched their names altered beyond recognition. American capitalism became the connective tissue and religious mantra linking the groups of emigrants who vied for a place. Unlike Canadians, Americans have fought on their own soil to determine whose notion of identity would persevere. English settlers fought the War of Independence to establish a new identity; after a civil war costing thousands of lives, and a further hundred and forty years of frustration, black Americans are now allowed to dream the American Dream, too.

Europeans, especially Central and Eastern Europeans, have endured much in the name of nation-building. Countries have been rendered and reconstituted. Peoples have been pushed back and forth across contested territories like so many chess pieces. Over the mere hundred years from 1909 to today one could fill a book with the various revisions in frontiers between those nations which currently exist and those which have ceased to be. Many of those frontiers remain a subject of recurrent tension, even when they have been legally settled. People retain an idea of what appropriate borders are for their nation, and these ideas are always the result of a subjective reading of the history of a people. For, until recently, there was little doubt as to what constituted a nation in the European Mind: a people and its shared language. This state could contain other ethnicities as long as they were subordinate. There were no truly multicultural states in Central Europe in the period of the 20th century for the simple reason that the peoples of this region have always understood that survival, as an ethnic entity, depends on cultural dominance.

With the relatively recent expansion of the European Union and its welcoming of former Soviet Bloc countries into its fold, Schengen criteria have created more connections between peoples and occasional waves of migration of labour, as with the Polish exodus to Ireland in the 2000s. It is instructive that Schengen, and the free movement of labour, has done very little to change the ethnic make-up of major European countries, and almost nothing at all to that of countries in the centre-east of the region. People cling stubbornly to an idea of belonging, a tribal sense of identity that admits few outsiders and then only as probationary or conditional members. An E.U. citizen may be proudly European, and certainly appreciative of the numerous advantages that accrue to such status, but unless he is named Gerhard Schröder, they will invariably self-identify as a member of a more ethnically-based polity before they call themselves European.

Thus in this sector of Europe we have imperfect nations, each made up of a dominant people and one or more of the subordinate “castes” brought in as *gästarbeiter* , through reluctantly allowed immigration, or simply because they lost the fight for territory and did not move. No one feels their borders are quite right (generally being too small, rather than too big). They are nations, nonetheless, which have survived innumerable wars, occupations and attempts at ethnic cleansing. Such tests always galvanise the identity of a people. A shared experience or series of events is a fire around which a people gather at special moments to recall their sense of purpose.

What then, of Canada, a nation indistinguishable in many respects from its older cousin to the south, made up of people from all the countries of Europe and those from dozens more? What model can we draw upon in assessing the notion of our identity as a people or a nation? Although our links with Asia and South America are increasing, we still look primarily to America and to Europe as our partners and teachers in building a society. The untutored European will confidently declare that Canada is no different than the United States. As a New World culture, it cannot depend on a shared history for its sense of self. Like the Americans, we must concentrate on creating a new identity through a unified belief in a system of governance. Both are territorially huge countries, wealthy in resources, unburdened by memories of age-old injuries and injustices. Surely America, then, is our model.

Most Canadians would bridle at this convenient sequestering of the Canadian psyche into the American persona. We are as distinct from Americans as we are amongst ourselves. Canada is a far more culturally diverse country, speaking many more languages, celebrating more religions, more respectful the idea of cultural diversity as a factor in the making of a nation. This is the European Union model: each to its own within the home, with an umbrella to protect and guide the polity. Canadians remain, in the main, proudly pro-European and our social fabric is closer in form and substance to the models of northern European countries than it is to the United States. So can Europe and its Union can act as a template for the future development of a Canadian nation? Perhaps, save for the fact that only two of our provinces and territories could be considered to have previously been states (and colonial territories at that), that we have less than 10% of Europe’s population with a land mass that would swallow Europe (excepting Russia) several times over, and that we appear constitutionally immune to coalition governments.

How then, to define the Canadian identity, or even to determine if there is one?

As a Canadian born in the second half of the 20th century I have witnessed many things. In the almost 50 years between 1960 and 2009 Canada has grown from toddler to young adult. The 1960s produced the Quiet Revolution in Québec, first wholly indigenous flag and the shifting of our anthem from “God Save The Queen” to “Oh Canada”. The 1970s produced the political tsunami of the Québec secessionist movement and an exodus of many large anglophone businesses from the province. The 1980s produced the Carter of Rights and Freedoms and the National Energy Programme, which produced lasting enmity towards the federal government from Alberta. The conservative citizens of that province surely received their justice for this slight with Brian Mulroney’s signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement at the end of that decade, an agreement which has changed Canadian society in ways that are still being assessed. The 1990s brought drama to Canadian politics in the near-miss Québec referendum on sovereignty (in which I voted), and the Canadian role in the failure to stop genocide in Rwanda. The first decade of the new millennium brought Canadian refusal to participate in a phony war in Iraq, our first serious dissociation from American policy in over 30 years; but it also brought the quagmire of Afghanistan and a new wave of refugees from a war we could not stop in Somalia.

None of these events went without a counter movement, of course: the rising patriotic fervour of Canadians after Expo 67 was matched by the violent passion of the Québec terrorist cells and their campaign for independence. The election of the Parti Québecois in 1976, led by the charismatic René Levesque and his platform of “souverainté-association” occurred as the federal bilingualism policies of Pierre-Elliot Trudeau failed, one after the other, across English Canada, rendering the nation once again into *two solitudes*. Alberta’s stubborn libertarianism and the pro-American tendencies of the Mulroney government—who can forget the Prime Minister singing “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” with then-President Ronald Reagan?—were balanced by the death of the Progressive Conservative party and the rise of the nationalist Bloc Québecois in the early 1990s. The Québec referendum in 1995 was one of only several harbingers of a fragmentation that continues apace today. In that decade was born the strongly regional Reform Party led by Albertan Preston Manning, soon to be re-united with the rump of the Progressive Conservatives in the new Conservative Party. Former Prime Minister Joe Clark mused that Canada should think of itself as a “community of communities”. Newfoundland, since 1949 the poor step-child of Confederation, seethed with the closing of the cod fishery and talk of separation revived, if only as a form of elevated bar talk. Ontario, the rich, benevolent older brother of the federation, was mismanaged into debt under the NDP government of Bob Rae and its reputation as a haven for fairness and tolerance ruined, perhaps forever, by the brutal, primitive conservatism of the Mike Harris government. The counter-movement to Canada’s increasing political independence under Jean Chrètien in the first years of this decade is a current federal government that is closer to traditional American views both in terms of social issues and economic theory and practice than any Canadian government in history. Canadians remain largely liberal in their orientation towards governance, but the media, now owned by a handful of conservative owners, and the government, taking advantage of Québec’s virtual abdication from pan-Canadian affairs, have created a new Canada, one that is meaner in spirit and more divisive. It is hard to say that such a government represents Canadian views, but it must always be admitted that citizens in a democracy always deserve the government they get, assuming it is not stolen with help from your brother in Florida.

So, with these swings of the pendulum back and forth, what can we say about the state of Canada as a nation in the 21st century? Will my nation become a collection of Kosovos, or perhaps join with its North American neighbours in a new version of the European Union? The truth is that Canada is already balkanised. A country that is fully 99 years younger than the still-young United States; that was born not from an ideology or a grand vision but as a form of colonial housekeeping, which still maintains a Queen as sovereign and a Governor-General to represent her; which had not one founding people but officially two, neither of them being amongst the First Nations peoples who were already there when Cartier and Champlain sailed up the St. Lawrence; which mythologises the North and yet fails utterly to create any coherent development across the Canadian Arctic; this country where the national airline will charge a young student inquisitive about her country more to fly from Montreal to Vancouver than to London or Paris, such a country is not a community of communities but a fractured egg. For the phrase “community of communities” implies consistent, productive discussion of needs and priorities between the communities. When one thinks of the manipulation of federal good will by even the most federalist Québec government in many years, or the reflexive Ontario-bashing of Albertans, the continuing national shame of the state of our aboriginal peoples, the alienation of Newfoundland under its populist Premier Danny Williams, it is difficult to call such an entity a single community.

There are further divisions, less political than demographic, not uniquely Canadian but present and destructive. The split between rural and ex-urban communities with urban Canada is large and growing. Rural Canada remains almost completely white, settler European, and socially conservative. Ex-urban Canada is the home of the successful second and third generations of New Canadians, many of them of Asian and South Asian origin. They are also socially conservative but to date have tended to be politically liberal, in contrast to agrarian voters. Urban Canada, made up of our largest cities, is alienated from the other two blocs: socially and politically liberal (except, perhaps, for Calgary), they are the anathema of the current government. Indian First Nations have official sovereignty over their land, although they largely run on federal subsidies. Québec has been recognised by the Harper government as a nation, and busily attempts to act the part at international trade fairs. Regionally, Canada is more at odds than ever. Its federal government has been progressively weakened by provincial premiers—and I use the word “provincial” as an adjective rather than as a noun—out to rob and pillage what they can from the federation for the benefit of their constituents.

One might think that Canada can be knit together through its artists. This is a romantic notion which possesses particular allure for those, such as me, who fall within what the Harper government likes to call the “creative industries”. Truly, this is a great time for Canada in the artistic world, even as its artists are starved by a government more attuned to the openings of big buildings than to the root-and-branch dissemination of Canadianism through its cultural products. Our film stars, musicians and writers are known worldwide. This may in fact contribute to the problematization of Canadian identity; artists such as Bryan Adams and Celine Dion are world brands. How many of his legions of fans know that Jim Carrey or Leonard Cohen is Canadian? The theatre director Robert Lepage and his recent employers, the Cirque du Soleil, are seldom seen in Canada and are less and less associated with being Canadian.

The problem, if it is a problem, is that these artists seldom sing or write about Canada anymore. After the proudly provincial work of theatre artists in the 1970s, with *The Farm Show* and *Paper Wheat*, *Ten Lost Years* and the 1960s plays *Riel* and *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, playwrights began to move towards a more universal style and subject matter in their playwriting. Scour the work of our best playwrights, John Mighton, Sally Clark, George F. Walker, Colleen Wagner, Maurice Panych, and look for a Canadian reference that is more than tangential. There are more Canadian examples to be found in our novels and short stories, including those from a wider variety of cultural groups. Our music, however, remains tied to the American market. For every reference to Kingston or a “Speedway” in songs by the Tragically Hip or to first love in a hockey rink in the songs of a Kathleen Edwards there is the generic twang of Shania Twain, the ethereal twaddle of a Sarah McLachlan, or the mystical potpourri of a Loreena McKennitt. The Canada that was so fascinating to Neil Young when he wrote “there is a town in North Ontario…all my changes were there” or of musical laureate Gordon Lightfoot’s *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* seems less interesting to Canadian artists as subject matter or even as a locale for celebrating their identities as Canadians. Amongst this number I must ruefully count myself. As a theatre director I have not directed in Canada since 2002. My international organisation dedicated to alternative modes of performance creation, CATT, the Centre for Alternative Theatre Training, will visit Kosovo, Serbia, Romania, Ukraine, Uganda, the United States, Bosnia and Greece in the next two years, but not Canada. I can offer no explanation for this except that my definition of myself as a Canadian is that of a person and artist who is comfortable almost anywhere, because he does not seek to impose his culture on anyone else or to promote it at anyone’s expense.

Who speaks for Canada, then? Is it necessary, or even valid, to consider a unified voice or cultural identity as a valid means of defining a nation in our day and age? For many years Canada has been considered as the national version of Gertrude Stein’s famous statement about Oakland, California, that “there’s no *there*, there”. In a positive way, Canada has taken pride in its boring, methodical reputation as a pillow that absorbs the screams and lashings-out of the tormented nations whose emigrants we welcome. Let’s go through the laundry list of dearly-held clichés: we are a nation of peace-keepers, reserved, polite to a fault, perhaps a touch naïve. A country, as Michael Moore so giddily described it that keeps its front doors unlocked. I have encountered all these quaint stereotypes in my travels.

Above all, the shibboleth that Canadians have most cherished and for which we are best known is multi-culturalism. Now this philosophy has been accused by analysts as shallow and outmoded, devoid of theoretical heft and unrealistic in practice. Multiculturalism creates ghettoes, islands unto themselves. Interculturalism, the process of actually understanding and intermixing with another’s cultural beliefs, is a rather more difficult process to undertake. Canada stands exposed as a nation of settlers whose well-meaning descendants eat at Chinese restaurants and go to Caribbean festivals but who do not invite Somali refugees to dinner or walk the Jane-Finch corridor in North York at night. White Canadians feel shame at our treatment of the native peoples but we never do anything meaningful about it. Anglo-Canadians widely profess to love the *je ne sais quoi* of Québecois but less than 10% of them ever learn French at a functional level. That figure, surprisingly, is not significantly higher amongst francophones learning English.

A community of communities only exists when the effort is made, continuously and over a long period of time, to build bridges between those communities, bridges which are two-way streets and which are strong enough to hold a great amount of traffic. So Canada, at present, does not fulfill this criterion as an umbrella national entity. What are we, then? Perhaps Canada is a post-national state. A state of states. States do not have to get along to exist within the same federal framework. Nor do they have to share a cultural identity, at least if the E.U. is any example to go by. Within this framework, however, there is an implicit assumption that all member states share a history, some modern variant of the creation mythologies which led to the formation of the first peoples of the earth. The European continent has a history which binds its peoples together, through the formation, destruction, reconstruction and renaming of the countries which make up its numbers. Canada can make no such claim. Its native peoples share a distinct history of perhaps sixteen thousand years independent of contact with Europeans. The European settlers brought, over the years, the legacy of their shared past and imposed it in the form of legal and political structures. The emigrants who have streamed to Canada since the 1880s increasingly share no cultural or historical link with the aboriginal or European groups.

Canada is, perhaps, the only country where almost no one knows all the lyrics to the national anthem. We cannot even sing the same song. What hope, then, for this dysfunctional non-nation?

My positive view is based on a quixotic belief in the power of dyadic relationships and the primal force of the social contract. In an age where identities can be constructed virtually through social networks and on-line communities, and where real-world reputations can be destroyed in a keystroke on Facebook or YouTube, it is pertinent to ask whether the nature of identity is in flux as never before, both micro-cosmically in the individual, and macrocosmically in the nature of the social collective. It is useful to think of an ecological model in determining an identity with the flexibility to develop through all the changes we are facing in the next twenty years. One of the most profoundly cherished Canadian shibboleths is that we are close to nature. We are actually closer to the United States, in that 80% of our population lives within 100 km. of the American border; but notwithstanding this, perhaps we can speak of one of the basic elements of a Canadian identity as the idea of “leaving a light footprint”. I go back here to my idea that, as an international artist, I do not seek to impose an aesthetic or ideology on the cultures I am privileged to visit and to work with. Rather, there is an organic trading process which takes place, a dyadic bond formed where one is slightly transformed by the other. You do not take without first offering of yourself. Canadians are not visionaries. We are not messianic. Accommodation is the Canadian reflex, and if self-abnegation occasionally accompanies that, it’s fine by us. We’ll get you back later.

Identity has historically been viewed as a construct, a collection of beliefs and normative behaviours. A person, or a culture, stands for something (or many things). That is who they are. What if a culture can be described as an almost unbearable lightness, seeming to stand for nothing, everything, or whatever lies in-between? It’s a dangerous proposition, but perhaps Canada can be said to fit this virtual-nation paradigm. It stands on guard for thee, citizen, but it doesn’t want to know much about you. The true north will stay strong and free and largely unvisited or developed. This is Canadian identity as one of those old children’s toys, the Etch-A-Sketch. The Etch-A-Sketch allowed a young child such as myself with no discernible drawing talent to draw a picture, display it to whichever unlucky adults happened to be in range for approval, and then, not having received acknowledgement of my brilliance, to erase it quickly and easily, so as to start over again. The history of the previous sketch was not important, just as few young Canadians can tell you about the Great Railroad or the McKenzie Rebellion of 1837. The present moment is all. The Canadian federation is an etch-a-sketch construct: it’s a blank page. Perhaps this aspect of the national psyche best represents the hope that prospective emigrants feel when they apply to come to Canada, which they retain even after swimming through the dreadful incompetency of our immigration procedures. Canada represents hope in the form of a blank page. Every day, month and year the page fills up with the incidents, the myriad successes and injuries which in another nation would constitute a history. The events I mentioned as seminal in the fifty years between 1959 and today are known only by a small handful of Canadians, mostly of European descent. Most Canadians would describe their own personal history as more distinct and of more consequence, and this is how it should be. Through email, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and mobile phone social networking, Canadians are telling more stories than ever before, with more personal investment. No government or corporation can ever successfully control this flow of information and the direction of its cultural tide. Canada exists on-line, as a place for Canadians and non-Canadians of the non-virtual world to mingle and share their stories. This is simply an accelerated version of what Canadians have done for decades. They invite someone into the kitchen and tell their stories. In this respect the old children’s television show classic, *The Friendly Giant*, may be the most Canadian show ever produced. A large man with bowl-cut hair and quasi-medieval clothes could be seen each week chatting informally with a rooster and a giraffe, Rusty and Jerome, both puppets. All were complete equals; all told their stories. At the beginning and end of each show the Friendly Giant’s hand would be seen arranging a couple of comfortable chairs to accommodate the visitors. *The Friendly Giant* lives on, immortalised on YouTube. Each day the great on-line community wipes its page clean and millions of seekers begin with a new opinion, a new thought, a new idea. Their past writings may not actually have ceased to exist, as on-line security now tells us, but in culture appearance and belief matter, and the appearance of a fresh start, and the belief in a new beginning, are the invigorating, if shallow, roots Canadians place in the world. Younger generations of Canadians construct and re-construct their identities more fluidly and willingly than previous ones. To say that these identities are therefore less stable is logical. To say that they are less meaningful is not.

If the national page becomes a *tabula rasa* everyone feels they have a chance to write on it, sooner or later, this generation or that of the children. Unlike nations which remember 1389, or 1066, 1789, 1776, or 1848, and which associate these dates with the birth of nationhood or national identity, Canada, like the child who still waits to discover her talent, wipes the slate clean again and starts over, hopeful that this will be the time something really special happens.