Paul Martin is Canada's New Leader

But his minority government could be short-lived

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The Paradoxical Nature of the Canadian Identity

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When asked what defines them as Canadian, people commonly refer to a sense of safety and security, public health care, or simply say that they are “not American.” Inevitably, a Canadian’s sense of identity relates to areas that demonstrate a sense of Canadian distinctiveness vis-à-vis the United States. In many cases, there is an embedded sense that the Canadian way of life is superior to that of the Americans. Indeed, one journalist recently called Canada the “know-it-all neighbour” (Gatehouse).

Canadians, in trying to puzzle out a sense of national identity, too often reduce it to “not being American.” This is the product of years of reflection on what defines Canadians, leading one observer to state, “Canada’s identity is its identity crisis” (Spicer: 13).

Quite often, the Canadian identity was reduced to national characteristics that set Canadians apart from Americans. For example, noted Canadian thinker Vincent Massey (1959: 39) stated, “This brings me to the Canadian qualities on which we rightly pride ourselves—the qualities of moderation, of courtesy and of toleration.”

However, a major sea change has occurred. No longer in trying to solve the “puzzle of Canada,” do Canadians see themselves in terms of old historic relationships with Great Britain and the United States (Schwartz: 6–7). Canadians have adopted a new, confident approach to identity. Far from being unsure as to who they are, Canadians declare with swagger and without doubt that they are Canadian, and definitely not American. As prominent polster Allan Gregg (2003: 30) noted, “Our expanding sense of being different from the Americans gives us a more outward, more confident nationalism.” Matthew Mendelsohn’s extensive analysis of public opinion led him to conclude that “Canadians are very proud of their national identity, and the irony, of course, is that Canadians now love to shout about how quiet and modest they are” (cited in May).

This growing demonstration of pride and nationalism was reinforced by United Nations rankings on quality-of-life in the 1990s that showed Canada to be consistently among the best places in the world in which to live (and, notably, ahead of the United States). Canadians appreciated external observations that Canada was a distinct (and more “cool” and liberal) country than the United States (Economist: Kraus; Montgomery), inflating Canadian pride.

But what are Canadians shouting about? A substantially different social contract from the United States? Or simply the desire to be different from Americans? Given that the evidence increasingly suggests that it is the latter, it is necessary to heed Campbell’s (2000) call to examine mythologies like the superiority of the Canadian way of life.

Despite this newfound certainty, there remain numerous contradictions about the Canadian identity. There is a growing gap between the values articulated by Canadians and their governments and the reality of Canadian public policy and public opinion (Nimijean). The Canadian social contract remains fragmented and contested—as we would expect in any liberal democracy—but especially so in Canada, a country rooted in ideological diversity. Canadians share many common outlooks and policy approaches with Americans (Boisvert), and there are many areas, surprising to Canadians, where Canadians trail Americans in
their attitudes and approaches to public policy (Gwyn). Environmental policy is one such area. The beauty of the land is a major source of pride for Canadians (Parkin and Mendelsohn). Yet Canadians are often shocked to discover that the United States is often far more effective at environmental protection, pollution control, and energy efficiency than Canada, which according to the OECD has a poor record on many key indicators (Mitchell).

So why are Canadians more certain and boisterous about their identity at the same time that Canadian society is marked by contradiction, a "rhetoric-reality gap," and many similarities with Americans? The desire to proclaim a distinct Canadian identity relates to significant changes in public policy, due to the growing impact of neoliberalism and globalization. This has diminished the policy-based nature of the Canadian identity that emerged during the post-WW II era, when Canadians developed a distinct way of managing their society. However, as the policy differences between the two countries have diminished, the need to proclaim national distinctiveness has grown.

**Thinking about the Canadian National Identity**

Anthony Smith (1991) argues that citizens in western countries, despite the growing heterogeneity of their populations, continue to have strong ties to their countries and a strong sense of national identity. This is due to a sense of political community that emerges from shared links to political institutions and a single code of rights and duties for citizens. National identity helps individuals situate themselves in a greater world, both nationally and internationally. It connects people, allowing them to feel like they are part of something greater despite individual differences: "it is the area in which individual identity is most closely bound up with collective identity." (Smith 162).

If this is so, then why has there been perpetual concern about the Canadian identity? Why have Canadians privileged internal differences over a common identity? Spicer (1995: 17) notes that Canadians must endure a challenging climate, the challenge of geography (a huge country bordering on the economic and political powerhouse USA), and a diverse history involving numerous ethnic communities, a decentralized federal system, and competing economic regions. This has produced a distinct value set. He argues, but it is difficult for people to appreciate.

Not surprisingly, the theme of survival (Atwood) became a key definer of the Canadian identity. However, this type of quasi-geographical determinism provided a "rationale for anti-Americanism" around the time of Confederation (Berger: 14-15) that involved notions of superiority over the Americans. It included a crude belief of racial superiority (that only strong people could survive such a difficult climate, unlike "southerners" in the USA) that distinguished Canada from the United States (see Berger: 14-20; and Shields for accounts).

While that extreme view has been discredited, the sense of superiority over the Americans endured (Berger: 22-23). The idea that Canada was a "northern country" populated by strong individuals allowed divided Canadians to share at least some sense of a common vision, purpose, and existence. For no matter where you were in Canada, you were defined by the patrimony of the North (Shields). This included the "myth of hockey," which argues that hockey, associated with the cold North, is something that distinguishes Canadians from the rest of the world (Francis: 167-169).

However, as Shields (1991) demonstrates, there is a significant difference between the mythological image of the Canadian north and the "real north," which is rarely experienced by most Canadians. Therefore, we need to look beyond the land at another basis of national identity.

It is more useful to examine the political institutions that Smith argues inform national identity. From this perspective, a lack of shared history and the inability (or unwillingness) to develop indigenous Canadian symbols, institutions, and a unique political culture is at the root of the Canadian identity crisis (Bell). Thus, economic and regional grievances, competing linguistic groups, a diverse population, and a tense relationship with aboriginal peoples defined Canadian politics and the Canadian identity. First British, and later American, influences shaped Canadian life considerably. Not surprisingly, it was easy for Canadians to become obsessed with internal differences in ways that other heterogeneous countries did not.

However, Canadians have often ignored the actions that informed a distinctive national identity, especially with the rise of the welfare state in the post-WW II era. Herschel Hardin (1974) argues that Canadians responded to these challenges by developing a "public enterprise culture." Canadians used the state to overcome the cleavages that otherwise might threaten Canadian sovereignty. Both Armstrong (1996) and Brodie (2003) argue that a Canadian value set, reflecting the values of "caring and sharing," emerged in this era. Policies and programs that sought to improve Canadian society for the benefit of all embodied these values: for example, public health care, the expansion of the postsecondary education system, and social...
assistance. Programs also combined symbolic statements about the Canadian identity with actions that could improve the life situations of certain Canadians — most notably official bilingualism and multiculturalism policy. These were supplemented by the more symbolic aspects of national identity, such as the adoption of a new national flag in the 1960s and the centennial celebrations of Canadian confederation. Together, these acted as the common political institutions that shaped a distinctive national identity.

Such initiatives were the product of Canadian ideological distinctiveness. The dominant Canadian liberalism, unlike American liberalism, is tempered by the presence of viable conservative and social democratic ideologies (Horowitz). This allowed for the emergence of a social welfare state that acted in response to both individual and collective demands (Resnick: 29-31). For example, public health care was initiated provincially by a social democratic government, and only extended federally by the Liberals, after considerable public battles. Nevertheless, health care has become a key feature of the Canadian identity because Canadians valued what the program offered them, not the values supposedly behind the program. Not surprisingly, all political parties continue to support the idea of a public-funded health care system (even if it has a large private dimension), because Canadians feel ownership over the system. Thus, ideological diversity and its policy outcomes, more than anything else, made Canada and Canadians distinct from Americans, for they informed how Canadians governed themselves.

The Canadian Identity Crisis Emerges

Hardin (1974) suggests that despite this distinctive identity, Canadians had trouble seeing their national identity because they used “American lenses” (a homogenous form of liberalism) to look at themselves. They could not see how ideological diversity contributed to a distinct “public enterprise culture” in which Canadians used the state to overcome the challenges of geography, linguistic duality, ethnic diversity, and the presence of a strong neighbour to the south.

These have challenged the Canadian identity in the past few decades. Factors include a growing American influence economically and militarily in Canadian public life; economic stagnation associated with a global energy crisis; the emergence of an organized nationalist movement in Quebec; the emergence of “third force” communities in Canada, who argued that there was a need for an inclusive Canadian citizenship that extended beyond the recognition of two official languages; and the rise of a more organized voice for aboriginal peoples, who noted more forcefully than ever the unjust treatment they experienced at the hands of the federal government. In the 1990s, there were several high profile (and sometimes violent) confrontations with aboriginal peoples.

Some attributed this ongoing crisis to a lack of shared history and values, resulting in a fragmented identity that could not withstand the pressure. Many state-led initiatives attempted to address the crisis and reshape perceptions of the Canadian identity. These included a task force on national unity in 1978; national constitutional conferences in the 1980s, aimed at addressing grievances of Quebec and aboriginal peoples; Liberal efforts to strengthen relations with Europe in order to weaken Canadian dependence on the Americans; this was followed by the Conservative’s desire to promote free trade in the North American continent and redefine Canadian nationalism (see Blake). The Constitution was patriated in 1982 as a sign of Canadian independence. A central feature of this act was the creation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, intended to act as a symbol of pan-Canadianism to unite Canadians. Two further rounds of constitutional discussions (leading to the failed Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords) in the late 1980s and early 1990s focused on the shared values of Canadians. Following the collapse of the Meech Lake Accord, the federal government created the Citizen’s Forum on Canadian Unity in 1990 to examine the growing sense of division in Canada and to identify what kind of country Canadians wanted. In response to the 1995 Quebec referendum and economic challenges created by globalization, the Canadian government again identified the need to promote shared values as a response to political turmoil (Nimijean). The federal sponsorship program was created to promote Canada and the Canadian identity in order to counter the claims of Quebec nationalists, to promote the visibility of Canada in Quebec, and to increase the attachments of the Quebecois to Canada.

Why Didn’t These Initiatives Work?

These initiatives sought to enhance a sense of Canadian identity and address the crisis of national unity. However, in many ways they accentuated the differences between Canadians. They tended to ignore the actions and programs that Canadians could experience, and artificially tried to create a sense of attachment to the country. This was especially true of cases like the Charlottetown Accord. Debates about the proposed “Canada Clause” devolved into legal wrangling about which groups should receive first mention, as the clause could potentially serve an interpretive guide for the constitution. In response to the federal sponsorship program, many Quebecois were offended with the notion that their “loyalty” to Canada
could be won by flying the Canadian flag throughout the province, while many English-Canadians resented the fact that program dollars were disproportionately going to Québec.

So why focus on shared values? After all, values emerge because of actions taken. They do not exist first and then inform actions later. It is misguided to focus on characteristics and values that few Canadians can be expected to share, either because of ethnicity, regional differences or ideological diversity. Canada is a diverse and pluralistic society. Values can be defined so broadly as to lose meaning (are Canadians really more peaceful and law-abiding than Americans, if their crime rates are higher but murder rates are lower, as Gwyn (2004) notes. How do values like “equality” and “tolerance” inform public policy? Focusing on such values ignores the fact that liberal democracy entails disagreement and fights about public policy, not about defining shared values to which public policy should adhere (Norman).

Joseph Heath (2003) argues that Canadians want distinct values in order to be different from the United States. However, he notes that when we look at issues that inform Canadian distinctiveness—same-sex marriage, environmental protection, and even health care—distinctive values are not at work. Canadians are divided on key issues (same-sex), do not act to support their values (environmental protection), and do not even see equality as a huge priority (health care) (Heath). Canadians claim toleration of difference as a core value, but Canadians appear suspicious of difference. Eva Mackey (2002) calls this the “myth of tolerance.” Moreover, governments have been using diversity as a selling point for implementing a neoliberal agenda (Abu-Laban and Gabriel). Not surprisingly, commentators are publicly wondering if Canada was as “cool” as it thought it was (Klein; Travers).

Values should not be seen as the basis of national identity: rather Canadian ideals and values flow from how Canadians manage their society. Identity is not a static concept, as a values-based approach suggests; rather, it is dynamic. As Hugh Segal (2003) notes, the Canadian identity is found in its actions, both past and current. It is not enough to cite past actions to state that Canadians hold certain values. They must be upheld constantly. However, when we look at actions and Canadian public opinion in recent years, we see the appearance of a “rhetoric-reality gap.”

**Why the Shift?**

"Brand Canada" in a Neoliberal Age

Political crisis in the 1990s, globalization, and neoliberalism, transformed or dismantled many of the institutions that defined Canada in the post-WW II era. This produced the “greedy and mean” Canadian (Armstrong), with public policy emphasizing deficit reduction and individual self-reliance rather than collective measures to public policy problems (Brodie). With the new dominance of neoliberalism, the forces of Canadian ideological diversity were considerably tempered, as alternative approaches to managing economic crisis were rejected (Armstrong). The social democratic New Democratic Party became a less forceful advocate for collective change as it largely accepted the constraints of the new fiscal orthodoxy. The Red Tory tradition in Canada disappeared with the collapse of the Progressive Conservative Party and the emergence of the Reform Party (and later the Canadian Alliance Party), which led to pressures to “unite the right.” The outcome, the Conservative Party of Canada, has adopted the principles of neoliberalism (reduce the role of the state; balance budgets; cut taxes), and the collective impulse of the old Progressive Conservative Party has largely disappeared.

Brodie demonstrates how neoliberalism challenged the collective basis of the Canadian identity. Deficit cutting and scaling back the role of the state in public life undermined those actions that helped define Canadians. A fundamental shift occurred in Canadian public life: as governments cut back on expenditures, public policy was increasingly geared to “those in need.” Brodie notes that the new narratives of the Canadian identity reflect the neoliberal era. Governments tell Canadians to adapt to change, ask less of government, and act aggressively in the global economy. This new way of looking at the Canadian identity is “the stuff of nationalist myth making—the invention of a tradition and a foundational story where none existed before. And, like all national myths, ours serves to contain dissent and to mobilize citizens around new governing practices and policy agendas” (Brodie 26).

These new policy agendas and governing practices are part of “Brand Canada.” I have argued elsewhere
that government has scaled back its activities, why have Canadians started to shout about their distinctiveness?

Several factors are at play. The federal government’s branding strategy has tapped into this nascent Canadian pride (Nimijean). Corporations like Roots, Molson’s, and Tim Hortons celebrate Canadian symbols and distinctiveness in their advertising campaigns, and it appears that corporate images are a new icon for Canadians to relate to in unison. The U.S.-led war in Iraq led many to articulate a sense of Canadian distinctiveness internationally. Branding Canada as “cool,” because of differing policy positions from the United States, has heightened a sense of Canadian pride (Pelletier).

The nationalistic icons associated with Brand Canada have become the new institutions around which citizens identify. However, the rise of “brand politics” is troubling. As Rose (2003) argues, it challenges our democratic life, for it substitutes politics and policy with image and propaganda, and “shallow nationalism” replaces meaningful citizenship and the public sphere. The result, he contends, could further lower rates of political trust.

Moreover, brand politics allows contradictions in Canadian society to be glossed over. Despite “Cool Canada,” Canadians are in fact quite evenly split on the issue of same-sex marriage (Leger). Over the past decade, Canadians have warmed considerably to the American idea of the melting pot, in some cases strongly preferring it to the Canadian idea of the mosaic (Kapica). Public opinion surveys have shown that close to half of Canadians are uncomfortable with current levels of immigration (Angus Reid), and they show that a strong minority of Canadians (ranging from 25% to 40%) express concerns about immigrants who are visible minorities (Angus Reid; Globe and Mail). These all challenge the embrace of multiculturalism that is central to the Canadian identity (CRIC 2003). Canadians are also less trusting of government than Americans (CRIC 2002). This suggests that as the two countries become more similar, there is perhaps a need to exaggerate the differences (Brooks).
also forces Canadians to evaluate their mythologies.

If in fact public policy in the name of the collectivity was at the core of the Canadian identity, then it follows that downsizing the state negatively affected that attachment. Now that national governments brand their countries in order to distinguish themselves internationally, asserting national distinctiveness in an era of globalization and neoliberalism replaces the core distinctiveness that historically emerged from how societies organized their public life.

Still, Smith argues that despite ongoing heterogeneity, national identity is a very persistent sentiment, as people continue to identify with their political community and its institutions. So given the neoliberal turn, is there a basis to ongoing Canadian distinctiveness that is rooted in public policy and not in exhortation?

The evidence suggests that Canadians remain attached to a sense of Canadian identity that is more than not being American. Canadians continually favour reinvestment in social programs over tax reductions and debt repayment (CRIC), even as governments preach the value of fiscal sovereignty. Canadians might even accept further continental integration, but only if Canadian principles and the ability to maintain distinct policy choices can continue (Maxwell). Canadians continue to be proud of its international reputation as a multilateral country that promotes peace (CRIC 2003). In short, Canadians want to continue to believe that their country possesses different values and can have on occasion a different policy agenda than the Americans, even though Canadians share many outlooks and interests with Americans. This sense of identity is connected to the idea of Canadian sovereignty: the power to choose how a group of citizens governs itself.

**Conclusion**

The challenge for understanding the nature of the paradoxical Canadian identity is not to look at identity per se, but rather to focus on the actions that shape the Canadian social contract. These inform national identity, not a set of supposed shared values. When we look for the latter, division is sure to emerge, for we begin to see a “disconnect” between articulated values and the values that emerge from actions. This rhetorical reality gap, more than anything else, reflects the current state of the Canadian identity. To understand this dynamic, Canadians must look beyond national mythologies and explore the actions that define Canadians and their country.

Thus, we get the paradox of the Canadian identity. Canadian distinctiveness emerged because of actions taken by Canadians and their governments. It did not emerge because Canadians simply wanted to be different from Americans or because they somehow managed to survive a rugged and often inhospitable land. However, now that neoliberalism has undermined many of these actions, and political events have furthered challenged Canadians, the ability to promote a sense of attachment through the public sphere is much more difficult. Due to the decreasing impact of ideological diversity. As the Liberal government continues to argue, many state activities must be scaled back in order to finance the health care system, especially as the population ages. However, Canadian citizenship is about more than health care. Government public policy is an important element of a shared Canadian identity. As its role in society decreases, the bonds that tie people together also weaken. This will only perpetuate division and an ongoing identity crisis, even though Canadians continue to shout loud about who they are.

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