

The Context of Canadian Policy

Canada's Circumstances

Several pervasive aspects of the social and political environment in which Canadians live and their leaders act almost always impact such matters as media policy. They include relations with the United States, French-English domestic relations, national identity, ethnic diversity, and the character of the Canadian state.

Relations with the United States. During a Canadian sports cable channel panel discussion of franchise problems in the Canadian Football League and a National Hockey League strike, one participant gratuitously remarked that, whenever Americans become involved, Canadian sports develop problems and deteriorate. The other panelists accepted his remark as a truism not requiring comment. The statement in that context surprised me; the sentiment did not. Canada's situation with respect to the U.S. is a festering source of irritation for many loyal Canadians. In their view the U.S. is aggressive and impulsive; Canada is compliant and patient. The U.S. is large and domineering; Canada is small and submissive. The U.S. is wealthy and unrestrained; Canada is poor and restrained. In addition to several armed incursions prior to the Civil War, for more than two hundred years the United States has slighted, affronted, and imposed upon Canada. When Americans act, Canadians are forced into protective reactions. Pierre Trudeau attributed the country's survival to Canadians having learned how to sleep with an elephant.

The American economy impinges on Canada through ownership and distribution arrangements (cf., Clement and Myles, 1994:20-21); it often swamps Canadian-produced supplies and, it is claimed, eventually shapes Canadian tastes and consumption patterns. With respect to audiovisual media, intentionally or not, spillover reaches large portions of the Canadian population. American firms control film distribution and exhibition and, because they also control most English language film production, American films dominate the Canadian market (cf. Pendakur). Popular U.S. magazines with minor editorial additions for the Canadian market absorb large shares of the reading audience and advertising dollar and, consequently, create serious problems for domestic publications. From a Canadian perspective the situation has all the earmarks of cultural imperialism. Consequently, many Canadians feel they have lost the ability to make independent decisions and, perhaps, even their sovereignty. Not surprisingly, politics, policy making, legislating, and public debate are preoccupied with the United States and its impact on Canada's autonomy.⁴ The American presence is a constant, inescapable concern in Canadian policy making and implementation.

French-English relations. Since the transfer of New France to Great Britain at the close of the Seven Years War, relations between Canada's French and English communities have been a major source of tension. The French felt resentful of and hostile to the conquerors. The British, wanting to avoid the burdens of governing a hostile, conquered people, arranged forms of rule that left the French colonial society largely intact but isolated from France. Despite their sense of abandonment and isolation from France, the French felt responsible for preserving French culture as they knew it. The English were indifferent to or disdainful of them -- people who even France did not value. The surrender launched a pattern of English social, economic, and political domination and French subordination. The situation was captured by Hugh MacLennan's apt phrase, the "two solitudes." However, Quebec is modernizing, a substantial white collar middle class has emerged, and the Quiet Revolution has dispersed political power to the populace at large.

Francophone Quebecers' success in changing their province did not address another of their gnawing concerns -- the eventual disappearance of French language and culture in Canada outside Quebec as one Francophone community after another, isolated among Anglophones, abandoned the language. Their concern