

Whether Canadian politics – and Canada – were dull was the question posed rhetorically by *The Economist* in March 1982, at the height of the Canada Bill debate at Westminster. The answer is a resounding No.

Is Canada boring?



A lot of readers won't like this

Many British members of parliament find it bizarre that they should be debating Canadian affairs. Some of them explain that Canada is boring. Well, it must be a bit of a bore to listen to speeches about a country for whose government you are not responsible. . . . In the debates on Canada, however, the keynote has been bafflement rather than boredom. Thus, on the one hand, the MPs have been warned that the bill is opposed by the Quebec assembly. On the other, they have learnt that it is backed by the votes of 72 of the 75 Quebec representatives in Canada's house of commons.

This sort of thing may baffle the British, but Canadians find it quite normal. And not just French Canadians. In Ontario, many people habitually vote Liberal in federal elections and Conservative in provincial ones; and throughout the constitutional tussle Ontario's Tory government (unlike the Quebec Liberal party) has sided with Canada's Liberal government. To read these riddles, you need some experience of a federal system, and the British have none. It was this that originally got them into Canada's constitutional tanglewoods. Back in 1867 they did not see it was asking for trouble to create a federation and fail to equip it with a means of amending its constitution.

That is why a British parliament in 1982 faces, for the last time, the embarrassment of having to legislate for another sovereign state. The niceties of the process may seem tedious, but the change itself is important. The same can be said about Canada. The notion that it is boring mainly reflects simple ignorance about the world's second largest country.

Where did these Icelanders come from?

Every traveller knows, one hopes, that Canada has two official languages; but how many know that its kaleidoscopic diversity goes much farther than that? There are more Italians in Toronto than there are in Taranto. A community of Icelanders is established in Manitoba, more than 1,000 miles from either ocean. The governor-general is of German and Ukrainian ancestry; there are Sikh temples in Vancouver and

onion-dome Orthodox churches on the prairies; in Cape Breton you may switch on the radio and find it is talking Scots Gaelic (and where else could one meet black speakers of that?). Stephen Leacock's sunshiny Mariposa, where they wore the green for St Patrick's and the orange for the Twelfth, sported thistles on St Andrew's day and flew the stars and stripes on July 4th with equal enthusiasm, pictured the rich Canadian mix.

Jonathan Swift shrewdly sited his Brobdingnag in this giant land whose vastness embraces thriving vineyards (the Norsemen who built houses in Newfoundland 1,000 years ago guessed right about that) as well as igloos. Contrasts abound between such long-settled rural areas as the "Anne of Green Gables" country; the big cities – now particularly notable for the way they have met the challenge of winter by building spectacular underground precincts; and the northern wilderness. It is a far cry from the Yukon of Robert Service's songs to the oilmen's city, Calgary, or the Okanagan apple country; much farther to Ste Anne de Beaupré, which has been famed as a healing shrine 200 years longer than Lourdes, or to Fredericton, where they revere the late Lord Beaverbrook and hold a spring festival for fiddleheads (tasty little things culled from ostrich ferns by boatmen).

Diversity and immensity create stimulating strains. Canada is rich in these too. There is always a row of some kind going on: environmentalists and defenders of Indian rights versus resource developers; Alberta versus Ottawa on oil pricing; the press versus Mr Tom Kent's commission; and so many manifestations of the unfinished struggle about Canadian unity, which has lain behind the whole constitutional reform battle. The creation of a united Canada was an impressive defiance of both geography and history. More such defiance will be needed if it is to be preserved. (Don't think Quebec is the only problem; a separatist has just won a by-election in Alberta.) Among outside observers of this complex and lively scene, bafflement may often be excusable. Boredom is not.