



STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION
DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 55/11 THE AMERICANS - HOW WELL DO WE REALLY KNOW THEM?

An address by the Canadian Ambassador to the United States, Mr. A.D.P. Heeney, to the Women's Canadian Club, Montreal, February 7, 1955.

In the ordinary course it is part of my business to do a good deal of talking - to American audiences - and naturally, for the most part, I talk about Canada and the Canadians. Today, I am going to take advantage of the opportunity you have given me of coming home to reverse my normal role and make a few observations about the United States, and the Americans.

This, of course, has been a favourite game for foreigners from very early days. The shelves of libraries in all free countries are crowded with a great mass of comment old and new upon the political and social institutions of the United States and the life and habits of its citizens. These range in quality from the wisdom of de Toqueville and Bryce and their modern successors to the foolishness of many others - who are better nameless. And the game still goes on - and at increased pace - and in all languages. So in lectures, newspapers, and magazines, over the air, and in still more books, the American psyche is subjected to analysis and comment.

We Canadians have always taken a pretty active part in this game of "observing" the Americans. And I have the impression that recently it has again become even more popular in this country as it has in others. This, I believe, is as it should be. In this year 1955 it is of great importance that other nations - and particularly Canada - should interest themselves in the people upon whom the future so greatly depends.

In the eighteen months since I went to the United States, I have naturally been preoccupied in contemplating - though that is a rather misleadingly tranquil expression - that immense country, its institutions and its inhabitants. Indeed, in one way or another, this is the subject which compels nearly all my waking thoughts.

Edmund Burke said nearly two hundred years ago that one could not indict a whole people - and the American people at that! By the same token, one cannot without massive qualification, endorse all the institutions and policies of a nation or praise all the

characteristics of its citizens. Nevertheless, despite this risk of immediate refutation - and no doubt largely because I am still a new boy in Washington - I propose to plunge ahead and pass on to you for what they are worth some of the impressions I have received in the brief course of my sojourn in the United States. When next we meet, I trust that you will not be so unkind as to hold me too closely to any opinions which I may express today.

We Canadians tend to regard ourselves as experts on the life and habits of our American neighbours. More than that, other countries have come to think of us as such, so that we are expected to know instinctively the American "reaction" to situation and events at home and abroad. Further than that, there are some who seem to take it for granted that in most affairs we share with the United States a North American point of view. There is, of course, some truth in both contentions. For, in general, Canadians might reasonably be expected to know more about the United States and about Americans than the people of other countries. We do live next door. And there is a close resemblance on the surface at least, and a wide similarity in the conditions of our lives. We are both essentially North American with still about us some touch of the frontier. Each of us, in our own way and over great physical and political difficulties have consolidated our independence on the foundation of a free federal state running from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The celebrated American "way of life" is very largely the Canadian. The renowned border is undefended not only against military attack, but against ideas of every kind and by every medium. For our part in Canada this means that we are exposed to so much that is purely American in print, in picture, over the airwaves and by word of mouth, that some Canadians have, not infrequently, become alarmed at the danger of "Americanization".

I suppose that my own experience before taking my present job was pretty typical of many Canadians. I had spent a good many summer holidays on the New England coast, had visited New York frequently to see plays and art galleries and hear music, had read some American history, seen innumerable American movies, and had an acquaintance with a fair range of American newspapers and periodical literature. At an early age I had even lived for a couple of years in the United States. Again, like so many of us in this country, I had acquired several American "in-laws". And so, again like most Canadians, I fancy, I was not unwilling to pass judgment on pretty well any feature of life in the United States and, from the greater intimacy of my Canadian knowledge, I was usually prepared to tip off British or French friends as to what the Americans would or would not stand for.

Now, after only eighteen months in the United States, during which it has been my daily duty to study and observe these people, I am not at all sure that I was anything like as knowledgeable as I thought. Nor, I confess, have I the same confidence that, in all circumstances, we Canadians have any certain capacity to know and to interpret these

neighbours of ours. How well do we really know the Americans?

This doubt on my part is, I expect, partly the uneasiness which comes over any foreigner upon closer personal experience of a country in which he has actually come to live. Close quarters tend to dispel the certainty encouraged by a more distant view. But it is, I believe, more than this. I wonder whether we have not tended, recently at any rate, to proceed on an easy assumption we have not really scrutinized - the assumption that all Canadians, instinctively or automatically, know and understand Americans.

One of the reasons why our judgment of the United States may not be wholly objective lies in our history. Most Canadians, I think, inherit unconsciously some of the anxieties of their ancestors. In 1775, Montreal was occupied by an American Army; Quebec was invested. In 1813, a later invasion from the United States was checked at Chateauguay. The St. Lawrence frontier was kept on edge twenty five years later by American "sympathizers" who sought to liberate Canada from the imperial yoke. The Civil War was followed by some pretty blunt and sinister talk in and out of Congress of the intention of nature to include the whole continent within "the magic circle of the American Union". These times are long gone - but they are not wholly forgotten. Whether conscious or not, there is among Canadians almost a "racial" memory of the days when Americans were thinking and talking out loud of expansion northward, of the "manifest destiny" of their country.

Nowadays, in neither nation, is there any thought, much less mention, of the old bogey of "annexation". Nevertheless, it seems to me that there remains in our Canadian attitude toward the United States a curious sense, no longer of fear or anxiety, but of competition, of somewhat unequal contest with the big fellow on the same street. Hugh MacLennan says that we want to be noticed. Perhaps that's much the same thing. In any event, such an element in our national make-up serves to cloud our judgment and at times even to prejudice our normal feelings of confidence and friendship. If I am right that there tends to be some element of bias in our attitude toward things American (and I would not exaggerate its importance), it has probably been given some impetus by the great additions to our own wealth and strength these past ten years. We have, too, been encouraged to take ourselves pretty seriously by flattering attentions paid us by other nations - not least by the Americans themselves. These events have not improved our capacity for objective judgment of our neighbours.

Over the years one of our principal complaints about Americans is that they know so little about Canada. We have thought, and often said, that the United States has tended to ignore us, to take us for granted. We have all heard stories of Americans asking what taxes we pay to London. We have all encountered grotesque geographical

bloomers about Canada among American acquaintances.

There is, of course, a good deal of truth in this criticism. No doubt the great majority of Americans know little or nothing of our history, our culture, our public life and institutions. And this can lead to misunderstandings. But I can assure you from my own experience that American ignorance of Canada is diminishing at an astonishing rate. More and more of the people I meet in all parts of the United States have become aware of Canada. They may not know much about our politics or our art. But they do know that they have as a neighbour a nation of increasing importance to them. The familiarity of Americans with our recent material progress, and particularly the great development of our resources, is extraordinarily widespread and detailed. The best evidence of that is the large and steady flow of U.S. investment in Canada, particularly since the war. But the recent process has been more than the result of the shrewd businessman's study of investment opportunities. Increasingly there is an awareness of Canada's national and international position and importance. And everywhere the attitude of those one meets is favourable and friendly. In fact, at all levels one encounters expressions of admiration for our country in terms which are often embarrassing.

Nevertheless, although I believe that Canada is much better known and even understood south of the border than it was, say, ten or fifteen years ago, much remains to be done. But what concerns me for the moment is whether the boot may be shifting to the other foot. How well do we Canadians really know and understand the United States? It seems to me that this may be even more important. Do we always take the time and trouble necessary to understand American points of view and the reasons for them? Or are we content to assume, just because we live next door, that automatically we know what is in the minds of our neighbours?

Do not let me give the impression that I underestimate the importance in the relations between our two countries of the multitude of things we have in common with the Americans - I have touched on some, and there are many, many others, great and small. But I am suggesting that we Canadians are not wholly immune from the risk of making mistakes about these neighbours of ours just as other "foreigners" do. Indeed, I believe we sometimes do make such mistakes, to our mutual disadvantage - and just because we are so close together and seem to be so much alike.

Let me touch on one very important department of American life in which I find that Canadians tend often to misunderstand what is going on in the United States - the political scene. I doubt whether most Canadians have much real understanding of "the American system", of the actual workings of U.A. public institutions, - The Presidency itself, the Congress, the Supreme Court - the Constitution itself. These are very different indeed from our own arrangements both in principle and in practice. On the surface, of course, we are familiar with a good deal - the sights and sounds of the party conventions, for example, are as well known

to us through the press and newsreels and television as much that happens in our own country - perhaps better! We do know the names and often a good many intimate personal details about many of the principal public figures in the United States. Some of their Senators seem as well known to us as their actresses and athletes. We read and hear a great deal of their political comment and criticism - that great American flood of public talk and controversy. We even have our own heroes and villains in American politics.

But this does not mean that we really understand what is going on in the public life of the United States nor that we are able to reach sound conclusions concerning it. Indeed, it is my impression that because Canadians do not in general appreciate the many and fundamental differences between our systems of government, we often draw wrong conclusions as to the course of United States policy and misjudge the motives and intentions of Americans.

My friend George Ferguson of the Montreal Star made a speech recently to an audience of American journalists in which he touched on this source of foreign misunderstanding of the United States. After describing the impression of confusion and disorder created by the loud clamour of public debate and controversy, Mr. Ferguson noted that "the untrained outsider is likely to conclude that a people so inherently confused and unstable has only itself to blame for the disasters that are bound to pursue it."

But the real situation is quite otherwise, Mr. Ferguson pointed out. The patient observer will come to realize "that the prophesied disasters seldom occur, and that, when the smoke and steam and noise have died away, the great nation-wide town meeting has come up with some very reasonable and moderate conclusions."

We in Canada are accustomed to Parliamentary institutions, to the British system of Cabinet government. The Americans are accustomed to a quite different system in which the Administration and the Legislative branch are separate and distinct. That basically is why we find it difficult to understand why or how Congressional Committees, let us say, may follow a line, publicly and often violently opposed to the President - even when a majority is of the same political party. Such a situation (and I could cite many other examples) is totally foreign to us. Our whole habit of thought is conditioned by our own methods of government. And so is the Americans'. And we must keep this constantly in mind in following their public affairs or we will most certainly be led astray.

Another reason perhaps why our understanding of things American may be less perfect than we think is to be found in the sources of our information. Many, perhaps most of our interpretations of what goes on in the United States derive from American sources. The American scene is for the most part reported for Canadians by Americans - Americans who are writing not for us at all, but for other Americans. The number of

Canadian newspaper correspondents in the United States is increasing and will, I hope, increase a good deal more. Canadian journalists can contribute better than anyone else to Canadian understanding of American affairs. But most of the news we now get in Canada is tailored to an American audience, who are assumed to have a background which we in Canada do not share.

Again, I wonder how many Canadians fully appreciate the veritable revolution that has taken place in the United States in the last fifteen years, a revolution which has radically affected the life and outlook of every single American? I am thinking primarily of the dramatic developments which have projected the United States from a position of isolation and insulation from world affairs to that of leadership of a strong coalition of the free nations - from a position of military weakness and no international commitments to one of immense military strength and heavy engagements round the globe.

It seems to me that we have accepted too easily a situation in which United States forces and funds provide the principal bulwark of our world. The other day the President laid before the Congress a budget which contemplated a total expenditure by the U.S. Government in 1955-6 of some \$62 billions. Of this no less than 65 per cent - some \$40½ billions - was made up of estimated expenditures for defence and security - all over the world. And yet the contemplation of such immense expenditures (and their implications for the U.S. taxpayer) has produced almost no complaint or criticism. Indeed, there were some who said openly that the amount is not enough. And so the free world is once more assured of U.S. troops and air squadrons in Western Europe, U.S. garrisons in vital areas of the Far East, and a powerful U.S. fleet to guard the peace on the seven seas.

Of course, we all know that these great expenditures, this new policy of international responsibility, are necessary in the best interests of the United States itself. Nevertheless, it is sobering to imagine what our situation - the situation of the whole free world - would have been in the face of the continued threat of Communist imperialism - if less wise counsels had prevailed in Washington, and if the American people had grown weary under the heavy burden they have been called upon to shoulder.

In its conception of its role among the nations, in the policies its government has adopted and its people have supported to perform that role - in many other ways - the United States today is a very different nation than it was a generation back. And its citizens of today are very different from their fathers and their grandfathers. Still the frank, friendly, generous neighbours we have known over the years, they have been thrust pretty abruptly to the front of the world stage. They have accepted, with remarkably little domestic dissension, the large responsibilities which go with this new and ungrateful role.

If we in Canada are to maintain with the United States our traditional relations or practical friendship and partnership, we must, it seems to me, do more to understand the Americans, their way of doing things, their enthusiasms and their prejudices. And as Canada itself is developing into a position in which our opinions count for somethings, we can no longer rely upon the assumptions of the past and the platitudes of after-dinner oratory. Let us, in our dealings with the Americans and in our expressions concerning their country, avoid any trace of ancient prejudice. Let us refuse to yield to the temptation to second and applaud those other foreign critics of the United States whose snide or distorted talk plays into the hands of our enemies. Let us, while maintaining our strong right to differ and assert our differences, behave as responsible adult friends and partners.

If we want the Americans to know us better, to have more appreciation of the character and traditions of this land; if we want them to understand why we are determined to develop this country as a sovereign North American nation; if we want them to appreciate the nature and strength of our association with the Commonwealth - if we want the Americans to understand these things about us, then we on our part must make it our business to know them and their country better than we do. More than that, we have a unique opportunity - and responsibility - to strengthen immeasurably our friendship with a people whose course in the next few years will determine the future of our world.

And so, it is not enough that we should be at home in each other's company south or north of the border. We in Canada must seek to know and appreciate the essence of these neighbours of ours, of their history, their traditions, their institutions, and their springs of action. If we do make it our business to deepen our understandings of these things, we will, I feel quite confident, emerge with a greater respect - and affection as well - for that great nation and its inhabitants next whom Providence has placed us on this fortunate continent.

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