

CANADIANS: A BORDER PEOPLE

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EIGHTY PERCENT OF CANADA'S POPULATION LIVES IN A BAND THAT IS ONLY ONE HUNDRED MILES WIDE, DIRECTLY ADJACENT TO THE U.S. BORDER.

BY CHARLES F. DORAN

Why has Canada made such a fuss over the U.S. decision to insist on passports at the border? In principle, the new requirement applies to all foreigners coming into the United States. But in practice, it applies equally to Americans going abroad, because they will need that passport to get back into the United States. There is no inequity here. So why are Canadians so perturbed?

This issue hinges, I believe, on a concept I first encountered more than 30 years ago. During a research seminar at Trinity College, University of Toronto, I heard a historian refer to Canadians as "a border people." Let me try to explicate this very Canadian sensibility.

A Band in Name Only

Start with the simple matter of geo-economics and demography. Although Canada looks on the map to be a very imposing territory, larger than nearly all other nation-states and with a length of coastline second to none, in human terms it is a very different kind of place. Eighty percent of Canada's population lives in a band that is only one hundred miles wide, directly

adjacent to the U.S. border, stretching over 3,000 miles.

Much of the country is cold and inhospitable, corresponding to Voltaire's dismissive quip about Canada as "quelques arpents de neige" (a few acres of snow). But within the zone straddling its southern border, Canada includes wine-growing locales that are much warmer than most of the northern, continental United States (e.g., Victoria and Niagara-on-the-Lake).

One must keep in mind, however, that the swath of Canada containing its major cities is discontinuous and truncated, interrupted by huge expanses of territory virtually empty of people but containing gigantic lakes, sprawling forests, broad prairies and intimidating mountain ranges. Even more than in the United States, the population of Canada is concentrated in its great cities: Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa-Gatineau, Calgary, Quebec City, Winnipeg and Halifax. These urban centers are isolated beads on a string, not homogeneous distributions of people and economic enterprise within a unified zone.

As in the United States, and despite the Canadian penchant for owning a "cottage on the lake," only about 1 percent of the Canadian population lives on farms. Manufacturing and services are spread out among the population centers, although Toronto has emerged with

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the richest share. The very large mines and stupendous reserves of petroleum in the oil sands are concentrated in the far west. Furthermore, the Canadian economy is drawn in two directions: not only east and west, but north and south toward the United States.

Two further characterizations of the Canadian polity shed light on the border mentality of its people. Since its founding by Cartier and other early French explorers, and notwithstanding the important participation of its native peoples, Canada is primarily the product of two founding groups: those who speak predominantly French and live in Quebec (and a few other places such as along the Ottawa River in Ontario and in Acadia), and those who live in the remainder of Canada and who mainly speak English. Of course, immigration has added millions of new Canadians who often do not speak either of the two official languages. Indeed, Canada prides itself on the idea that individual immigrants do not need to give up their former cultural identity when they become Canadian, thus distinguishing it from the presumed “melting pot” below its southern border. Canada is bilingual but also multicultural. These new Canadians add important talent and diversity to the population mix, not only in Quebec but in every other province, especially Ontario and British Columbia.

The Impact of Regionalism

In part because of the nature of Canada’s population distribution and its huge expanse, very identifiable regions have emerged that tend to further truncate contiguity within the narrow population band. Parts of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Quebec have more in common with Maine than with the rest of Canada. Regardless of state or provincial designation, for example, the Calgary Stampede is the best rodeo in the entire western circuit, bar none.

Similarly, the idiosyncrasies of the people living in Vancouver have more in common with those in Seattle and Portland than with “the people living on the other side of the mountains” in Canada, to invert a quotation from the late Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. And the Winnipeg Royal Ballet is as acclaimed in Minneapolis

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as it is in Toronto. Nevertheless, Canadians are Canadians and Americans are Americans.

Despite some protestations to the contrary regarding Ottawa from among those who value sovereignty (separatism, to most Americans) above all else, in social and cultural terms Canada is quite a decentralized place. And that decentralization aggravates an already present sense of vulnerability.

This sense of political and cultural vulnerability is not a concern about losing citizens to the United States. Immigration has always been a very open process on both sides of the border, with, it is true, more Canadians moving south than Americans moving north. The sense of vulnerability is much deeper and goes to the very heart of bilateral relations. This sense of vulnerability is about identity and culture, and whether Canada can be a real country, given both its geographic configuration as a people and its proximity and subordination to things American.

Conversely, this sense of vulnerability only accentuates the awareness for Canadians of being a “border people.” If Canadians were more contiguous within the primary population band, or if the awareness of regional and cultural differences were less prominent, they would be less conscious of their border status. Likewise, if the zone were wider or shorter, Canada would feel more like a “normal” country to its inhabitants. Instead, while Canadians are a very cosmopolitan people, often sending their children abroad to obtain at least some of their education and traveling a great deal, the citizens of Victoria normally have not visited Halifax, and vice versa.

But they *are* accustomed to crossing the U.S. border whenever a gallon of gas is cheaper on the other side, or to visit relatives or neighbors. They do so to catch a plane, or to transport the wheat harvest when the distance is shorter than not crossing the border. Americans living along the border do the very same thing. For a professor teaching at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y., taking a plane out of Durval Airport in Montreal is a whole lot easier than taking that plane out of JFK in New York City. In the aggregate, these border crossings amount to millions of travelers a year, even though only a relatively small subset of residents on either side of the

border may be conducting repeated crossings.

The Cost of Doing Business

The Canadian economy needs access to American business and American visits as much as individual Canadians need, and want, to get to the U.S. side of the border. A border people is dependent for its prosperity, and for its psychological as well as its physical well-being, on its ability to cross the border freely, openly and without fear of closure, however temporary such a capricious interruption may be.

In an age of “just in time” commerce, the automobile industry, still one of the most important generators of high-end manufacturing jobs in Canada, cannot lose an hour if it is to compete with Asian efficiency (Japan) and low wages (China). The border must be invisible. For if it exists in more than a pro forma sense, then it imposes what is called “border risk” on the investor who, in crossing that line, must contend with slowdowns and red tape. No one understands better than a border people how obstacles will work to their economic disadvantage. Both local and foreign investors will tend to avoid investment in the neighboring country if the risk is too high.

Thus, efforts to make the border “smart,” by expediting those who are regular and familiar crossers, pre-inspecting cargoes on each side of the border, and using the latest in monitoring technology to detect terrorist materials or terrorists themselves, are the most plausible of actions, costs permitting. Stockwell Day, the Canadian minister of public safety, and Michael Chertoff, head of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, hold more than the physical safety of their countrymen in their hands; they administer programs that affect jobs and determine incomes.

Asymmetries with the United States

The risks that a border people may fear if their ability to cross national boundaries is interrupted are exacerbated by the further reality of asymmetries. The United States has 10 times as many people as Canada, generates 10 times its gross domestic product and wields immeasurably greater military power. Moreover, the vast majority of Canada’s foreign trade is with a single country, the United States. Notwithstanding the territorial security that the U.S. defense presence provides, and the absence of any immediate external threat to Canada, such awesome one-sidedness might make any border

people wary. And it does.

This reality probably enhances Canada’s desire for autonomy and self-identity, though this sometimes takes the form of a nationalism that attempts to define itself in terms of whatever the United States is not.

When the British Empire collapsed, Canada lost its chief counterweight to the United States. On the one hand, Canada turned to its southern neighbor for protection and prosperity, and enjoyed a security umbrella at low cost to itself. On the other hand, it felt overshadowed and dependent on Washington. The unsuccessful effort under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in the 1970s to create an offset to perceived American dominance by a “Third Option” of trade diversification with Europe proved to be an embarrassing failure. The European Economic Community, as it was initially called, wanted too much in return for Canadian association.

Sharing its single primary border with the most powerful country in the world affords Canada most attractive commercial opportunities. Yet notwithstanding Canada’s penchant for contributing to international organizations, and absent meaningful territorial contact with any third country, this proximity also condemns it to perhaps the greatest sense of psychic subordination experienced by any nation-state on Earth.

The North-South Border Quandary

Now we return to the question I posed at the beginning of this essay: Why do Canadians object to the requirement that they produce passports to enter the United States?

From the American perspective, the border with Canada and the one with Mexico are juridical equals. Thus, in order to avoid invidious contrasts, they must be treated equally in political terms. But from the perspective of Canada, this is a false equation. The overwhelming difference between its border with the United States and the U.S.-Mexico boundary is the flow of people. According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, at least 10 million Mexicans, and quite possibly more, have crossed the American border illegally in the last decade. The same level and rate of illegal immigration surely is not true of Canadians.

Admittedly, Canada tends to soft-pedal the fact that over the past century, millions of its citizens have become Americans, sometimes after supposedly temporary visits that drifted into permanent residence.

However, the process of entry and eventual citizenship for Canadians is quite regularized. Because the predominant U.S. issue involving Mexico is the status of its millions of illegal entrants to the United States, an issue that does not exist on the Canadian side, it is understandable that Canada does not want the United States to think of its southern and northern borders concerning this issue as though they were identical.

Moreover, in the age of terrorism, because identification of individuals posing a security threat to the United States is paramount, the immigration issue becomes even more sensitized. The problem here from the Canadian viewpoint is not that illegal Mexican immigrants possess criminal records. Most do not. They come to the United States for one reason, to work. And they work hard. Rather, the threat for the United States, as Canada sees it, is that in this mass of illegal immigration, a few terrorists could slip in as well.

Given this reality, the United States may adopt a single stringent approach to screening the flow of immigration across all its borders, even though the problem is far less severe to the north than in the south. And if it does, Canada will lose the benefits of cross-border mobility.

While admitting differences in the quality of law enforcement north and south of the United States, the American concern is with possible terrorist infiltration in all three countries. In Canada some suspicious groups have raised considerable money to fund their foreign operations, a fact that local law enforcement officers are, of course, well aware of. Yet the rejection by the Canadian public and by members of the country's elites of the very idea that Canada could be used for such purposes makes the American equation of the terrorist threat from the north and from the south far easier to defend.

Still, for a border people the U.S. insistence on the use of passports at the 49th parallel has a decidedly retro feel. It is as though American thinking about globalization and about North American economic integration has suddenly been reversed. Passports are cumbersome and out of keeping with the electronic age, particularly for a country that, in large part, invented information technology. And with the U.S. instituting new access controls, North America seems to be moving in the opposite direction from the European Union, where the Schengen Agreement has facilitated travel around the continent.

Caught Between NAFTA and 9/11

For most of the long interlude of Liberal Party rule since 1945, partially offset by the prairie populism of the Progressive-Conservative governments of John Diefenbaker and Joe Clark, Canada was dead set against "continentalism," as any form of North American integration was then called. The Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, which eventually led to the North American Free Trade Agreement, was therefore as close to a "revolution of alliances" as North America has ever come.

Surely the psychic impact of the death of anti-continentalism for the border people of Canada was as traumatic culturally and politically as the British Conquest (1760) was for Quebec, or the end of British colonial tutelage and the beginning of independence (1867) for Canada as a whole. Reversing many assumptions about the origins of economic growth, association with the United States, the viability of Canadian commercial enterprises and the capacity to compete internationally, the Mulroney government (1984-1993) charted a bold new course for Canada despite real risks.

At its urging, Canadians placed their faith in the strength of the American economy and in their perpetual and undiluted access to it, both in terms of trade and finance. Still a separate country politically and culturally, Canada irrevocably tied its economic future to a faith in the openness and prosperity of the United States. Then came the attacks of Sept. 11.

That the shock of 9/11 for the United States in security terms was gargantuan and lasting is undeniable. But it generated consternation to the north, as well, albeit for somewhat different reasons. Not only was Canada now concerned about its own territorial vulnerability to terrorist attack, but it began to doubt the heretofore comfortable assumption that its great neighbor to the south was impregnable. Far worse, for a border people, was the matter of what the United States would decide to do to bolster its own security.

Indeed, then-U.S. Ambassador to Canada Paul Celucci declared "Security trumps trade," as did other American officials, including Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y. However valid its underlying argument for stimulating action to shore up defenses against terrorism, what did this statement imply for a border people who had put their faith in the perpetual openness of the American border with respect to the movement of Canadian goods,

services and people, as envisioned in the North American Free Trade Agreement? Was Canada's economic future in jeopardy not only because of the possibility of terrorist actions, but also because of the American effort to deter such actions at the border? Abruptly, all of the confidence Ottawa had placed in the unbroken web of economic enterprise in North America appeared to be called into question.

From the American perspective, no such doubts were warranted. Washington continues to maintain that North America can have both security and trade simultaneously if we accelerate the application of technology to monitor and examine goods and personnel at the border without imposing undue restrictions on the movement of either. Furthermore, when the United States sought enhanced territorial security, Canada was regarded as inside the circle, not outside it. Greater territorial secu-

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urity was thought of not as an obstacle to economic prosperity but as an essential parallel objective.

Placed in the larger historical context of dynamic change, and caught between the forces of NAFTA and the forces of 9/11, Canadians ask a strategic question: Are we in North America moving toward a greater

openness of borders, greater economic interdependence and greater efficiency through exchanges and economies of scale across those borders? Or are we moving in the opposite direction, toward greater inwardness, greater emphasis on internal security even at the cost of isolation, and tighter restrictions on mobility of all kinds? In short, can the United States really strengthen security without sacrificing openness?

These are the questions that a border people quietly but insistently raises, and thereby induces the rest of us to contemplate. ■

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