

Jean Chrétien's surprise: A Canadian nationalist legacy

THE IRAQ DECISION AS DEFINING MOMENT

Canada's decision not to support the United States and the United Kingdom in the unilateral invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003 was a defining moment for Canada and its position in the post-9/11 world. It was also a defining moment in Jean Chrétien's decade as prime minister. However unlikely it may have seemed during his first two terms from 1993 to 2000, he leaves office having staked out a Canadian nationalist position for Canada, and the Liberal Party, in relation to an increasingly imperial United States.

How likely was it that a prime minister who had embraced NAFTA and its projected extension to the Americas, economic globalization in all its forms, and starved the Canadian military of the resources required to permit Canada to play anything but a marginal role in global security, should suddenly step forward as champion of Canadian autonomy—on an issue on which the United States was trying ruthlessly to enforce compliance? Not likely at all, but he did, and in so doing, confounded critics on both the left and right.

In 1963, in an earlier defining moment, the Conservative government of John Diefenbaker had gone down to defeat at the hands of Lester Pearson's Liberals over the issue of US nuclear weapons on Canadian soil. George Grant had been moved to write his despairing *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* in response to what he saw as the triumph of Liberal continentalism.

Forty years later, a Liberal government stood up to the United States, while the conservative opposition (in both its manifestations) demanded unconditional loyalty to the American empire. This time, resistance did not lead to defeat, but according to the polls, rebounded strongly to the government's political credit.

BY REG WHITAKER

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Grant, it appears, was wrong about the Liberals, and about the inevitability of nationalism's defeat.

DEFYING THE LOGICAL LINK

Left-wing critics have argued that economic continentalization and globalization undermine the foundations for national autonomy. Moreover, the Chrétien government's successful pursuit of deficit elimination and its commitment to fiscal conservatism as a leading principle of its program, led critics on the left to conclude that the federal government was fully committed to a neo-liberal economic agenda that precluded swimming against the North American market tide in foreign policy as in other matters. The political and cultural superstructure, they assumed, will follow the economic base, and the latter points in the direction of a North American Imperium under the firm command of Washington and Wall Street. Logically

compelling this might be, but it simply has not worked out that way.

As pollster Michael Adams makes clear in his fascinating study of North American values, *Fire and Ice*, the notion of converging North American values is a myth. Canadian values have actually been diverging sharply from American values over the past decade. Canadians are becoming more liberal, tolerant, and adventuresome, while Americans have been growing more conservative, exclusionary, and fearful. Economic integration has not made Canadians more like Americans, but less. The assertion of an "America First" concept of global leadership under George W. Bush has persuaded a majority of Canadians that they do not share the American view of the world.

If values do not follow economics, perhaps it can also be argued that economics do not follow values. The Liberal conversion of the federal government from deep deficit to sound fiscal status, and the expansion of the Canadian economy under free trade, can be seen as reducing Canadian insecurity and vulnerability, and providing a level of confidence upon which a more autonomous and independent foreign policy can rest. This is especially the case when the United States in the Bush era—at both the federal and state levels—has sunk into a sea of red ink as a result of reckless tax cutting and a huge new bill for homeland security and imperial overreach. Contrary to the opinion of critics on the left, the Liberal pursuit of fiscal conservatism has strengthened the Canadian state and stiffened its backbone.

THE 9/11 FACTOR

The new post-9/11 dynamics were discernable well before the Iraq decision, although they were generally misread and misunderstood. Canada did not blindly comply with American directions in shaping its response to the terrorist

challenge. Instead, the Chrétien Liberals organized a campaign on two fronts: publicly against the terrorists, and less visibly against the negative repercussions on the Canadian economy of American border security measures.

There were very powerful and influential forces, both within and without, urging Canada in the wake of 9/11 to adopt a sweeping new North American security perimeter scheme, that would have severely undermined national sovereignty under the pressures of “harmonization” of policies with the United States. Despite the insistent voices of US ambassador Paul Cellucci and Tom d’Aquino’s Canadian Council of Chief Executives, Ottawa wisely chose to ignore this and other “big ideas” for further continental integration proffered by conservative think tanks, and instead opted for “thinking small.”

By engaging the Americans in a series of incremental negotiations under the “smart border” rubric, the Liberals adroitly moved the United States away from the dangerous big picture of continental integration, and onto the safer specifics of concrete arrangements to make the border secure enough in American eyes to ensure the uninter-

rupted flow of commerce, which was always Canada’s primary concern. In doing so, Canadian sovereignty has by and large been protected, as well as could be expected under the difficult circumstances. Critics in the Alliance who thought Ottawa was giving too little, and in the NDP who thought they were giving away too much, both missed the point. The smart border agreements, still ongoing, are in many ways a model of maintaining the always delicate North American balance.

THE FOLKS BACK HOME

The proof of the pudding came with the Iraq decision. Chrétien was able to safely ignore the threats of economic retaliation for this act of political apostasy, threats that came both from the Americans and from the right-wing opposition and right-wing media, secure in the knowledge that, blustering aside, the Americans would not bite off their nose to spite their face. Canada was doing what could be reasonably expected in the fight against terrorism and in making the northern border both safe and profitable for both sides. Retaliation never came, and the “ready, aye, ready” cries of Canada’s American loyalists,

have subsequently died down to a whisper, particularly after the failure to find weapons of mass destruction, and the quagmire of the Iraqi occupation strengthened Canadian satisfaction in having made the right decision.

Even some who have reluctantly acknowledged Chrétien’s nationalist credentials are expressing concern that Paul Martin will abandon this course to seek American cooperation at any cost. This is unlikely, given that a moderately independent Canadian course has proved both viable and popular.

Martin may benefit from distancing himself from some of the silly and overblown irritants from the Chrétien era (the oft-repeated “moron” and “bastard” comments from the fringes of the government), but he will be as faithful in pursuit of multilateralism and liberal internationalism as his Liberal predecessors back to St. Laurent and Pearson. His own experience in global economic governance pushes him firmly in the multilateralist direction. So long as the Bush administration remains in office, no Canadian prime minister can easily contemplate publicly enlisting in its America First crusade: the folks back home won’t stand for it. 

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Americanism to get re-elected. President Chirac used anti-Americanism to try to hold the EU together under French tutelage. Chrétien exploited foreign policy for domestic purpose more deftly. Implicitly building on the idea of Trudeau’s *Foreign Policy for Canadians*, which jettisoned Pearsonian “internationalism,” Chrétien made foreign policy serve Canadian domestic ends in two ways. Foreign policy-for-domestic-purpose was useful in knitting together Anglophone and Francophone, especially in Quebec, where the response to a common rejection of British and US intervention in Iraq (however heartfelt the criticism was for Chrétien) was a huge success. It came at just about the time that assistance was needed in giving “sovereignty” notions a firm shove off centre stage.

Foreign policy for domestic purpose also assisted the federal Liberal Party through Canadian opposition to American initiatives in the UN Security Council. The policy did not help Prime Minister Chrétien personally, but it certainly strengthened the party’s chances of re-election. In the United States, the photograph of Liberal Party MPs standing and wildly applauding the prime minister, after a speech that denounced British and US intervention in Iraq and affirmed Canadian virtual non-participation, was perhaps the most visible reminder of this use of foreign policy for electoral ends.

Jean Chrétien’s ideological preferences, his conception of the Canadian interest in foreign policy, his view of what was good for Canadian unity, and his

view regarding what benefited the Liberal Party in terms of popularity, all happily for him were correlated. Whoever was right or wrong about foreign policy direction, this Canadian role in foreign policy was in stark contrast to the role of Tony Blair and of George W. Bush, who mortgaged their re-election chances on behalf of a policy in which they believed, against Saddam Hussein and against international terrorism.

THE SECURITY PRIORITY

If Canada does not do things very differently, according to Thomas Axworthy, in terms of military preparedness, it will put its citizens “at risk” and/or condemn itself “to foreign policy irrelevance.” That is quite an indictment

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