

He kept us out of Buffalo: Jean Chrétien and Canadian nationalism

CHRÉTIEN AS NATIONALIST

When Jean Chrétien took office in 1993, he had in the bank the political capital of three strong nationalist credentials.

First, he was a player in the era of Pearson–Trudeau Liberalism that defined what, for many Canadians, nationalism meant. The definition included well-funded public (including cultural) institutions, subsidized cultural industries, half-hearted protective legislation, distance (measured metrically) from the Americans as well as hefty doses of iconography (the new flag) and ritual (centennial year). Chrétien was most highly visible as a major player in the climactic act of Pearson–Trudeau nationalism—the repatriation of the constitution.

Second, Chrétien came to us as the anti-Mulroney. Nobody could have done a better job than Brian Mulroney in embodying everything George Grant saw as lamentable. During the non-Liberal interregnum, Mulroney demonstrated to most Canadians that they didn't want a quick march into continentalist neo-conservatism and, really, they had no interest in becoming better Americans. Obliterating the Tories in 1993, was, in addition to all the sound pragmatic reasons, a feel good event.

Third, throughout the Chrétien mandate, the Liberals were the only nationalist game in town. The Tories never recovered from being reduced to the leader and the follower. The NDP was, even more than usual, pre-occupied with self-destruction. Only the two regional parties, Reform-CRAP-Alliance (now Conservative) and the Bloc, provided any semblance of an opposition. Outside Parliament, the real opposition came from increasingly provincial, provincial premiers.

For 10 years, there was very little question about who—and who alone—spoke

BY SETH FELDMAN

Seth Feldman is director of the
Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies.

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for Canada. Far more problematic was the question of what he was saying.

FROM ANTI- TO NEO-MULRONEY

The first Liberal Red Book equated Canadian national identity with Canada's cultural institutions and promised to restore stable funding to help those institutions recover from the Tories. What happened instead was a round of cutbacks, followed much later by a period of deep concern that, in the end, restored cultural funding to something like what it was when the process began—with more strings attached. This syndrome was not limited to the cultural sector but covered other institutions with which Canadians define themselves against their southern neighbour.

In light of this record, the Canadian nationalist might be forgiven for thinking that the prime minister had used his nationalist credentials as a smokescreen for a neo-Mulroney agenda. Nor was the Canadian nationalist shy about sharing

these thoughts. The opening salvo was Maude Barlow and Bruce Campbell's *Straight Through the Heart: How the Liberals Abandoned the Just Society* (1995). Barlow and Campbell accused Chrétien not only of an attack on Canadian institutions and the identity they embodied but also on the very foundations of Canadian democracy. They called for grass roots opposition to address both Canadian issues and (with some prescience) the forces of globalization.

Advocating a gentler consciousness raising over a grassroots rebellion, Richard Gwyn's *Nationalism Without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian* (1995) came to very much the same conclusion. Gwyn wrote of a Canadian identity battered from without by globalization and from within by the demands of the near compulsive cultural relativism of our multicultural society. "If we cannot forge some kind of partnership between the old and new Canadas," Gwyn warned, "our future may become that of a kind of Northern Los Angeles."

Gwyn's sentiment was echoed in Jack Granatstein's tireless campaign to restore an appreciation of the nation's heritage (most completely expressed in *Who Killed Canadian History?* (1998)). As if to make Gwyn and Granatstein's point, John Ralston Saul's *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1997) mined Canadian political history to identify a worthy and unique intellectual legacy.

Gwyn, Granatstein, and Saul reminded their readers that there are ideals inherent to the Canadian experience worth preserving, not just for our own sake but also for the sake of the increasingly dumbed-down, globalized world. In these and other writings, Canadian nationalism was being repositioned beyond physical borders. Canada was on its way to becoming a virtual entity—a kind of

ethereal Canadianism or what Gwyn had called in 1994 “the First Postmodern Nation.”

CANADIANISM WITHOUT CANADA?

For traditional nationalists, though, this all could be read as Canada evolving into a pleasant and useful memory. Nor were they alone in this opinion. Anthony DePalma, concluding his stint as *The New York Times*’ man in Ottawa, left us with *Here: A Biography of the New American Continent* (2001). DePalma observed that the work of continentalism was all but complete—and that Canadians welcomed their newly assimilated identity. His predictions got a boost after 9/11, when Michael Bliss and others opined that Canadian nationalism would not survive a militant American demand for continental unity in their “War on Terror.”

There was little faith on the part of traditional Canadian nationalists that the Chrétien government, given its record, would prevent Canada from becoming anything more than a department within US Homeland Security. A year after 9/11, Murray Dobbin, writing for the Council of Canadians, decried the “rapid Americanization of Canada’s institutions and political culture.” Mel Hurtig’s *The Vanishing Country: Is It Too Late to Save Canada?* (2002) concluded that nothing less than a new political party could protect the country from an American onslaught.

Perhaps the best researched of the Chrétien era nationalist laments was Stephen Clarkson’s *Uncle Sam and US: Globalization, Neoconservatism and the Canadian State* (2002). Clarkson was no happier than the traditional nationalists when looking at the Chrétien record. If there was a way out, it would come in the Canadian federal, provincial, and municipal governments finally seeing themselves pushed to irrelevance by the neo-conservative tide and, at long last, stemming it. Clarkson went so far as to suggest that this public-sphere revolution might in fact be inevitable.

Michael Adams’s extensive opinion polling, summarized elsewhere in this issue, gives a hint as to why. Despite or because of all the affronts documented in the nationalist tomes, it seems Canadians spent the Chrétien years becoming more Canadian, their core values diverging ever further from Americans. It is also possible to read into Adams’s data a vindication of the nationalists’ claim of a massive disconnect between the will of the people and the Canada being moulded by the nation’s political and financial elites.

THE NEWEST NATIONALIST

At the end of the Chrétien era, Canadians appeared to be the people that Canadian nationalists had been talking about all along. But even more surprising was the fact that these independent-minded Canucks finally had themselves a prime minister. For it was in his lame duck year that Jean Chrétien decided to play his long neglected nationalist cards. The canny politician may have simply been acknowledging the trends

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The Rt. Hon. Jean Chrétien: Revised standard version

BY GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE


George Elliott Clarke is a professor of English
at the University of Toronto.

A Frankenstein-faced, meeching, elfish
Aghoul,
Skulking in a graveyard of prime ministers,
Admiring how they bagged elections—
Or dreading how they later got sacked—
Those lumberjacks hulking in silk suits,
Those attorneys awkward in buckskins,
Defining the country as one more strip mine
After one more lucrative deforestation,
All Chrétien ever wanted was to join
This Gothic junkyard of shat-upon statues,
Clutching the *Criminal Code* in one hand,
A golf club in the other,
While sloshing out rhetoric that was Martinis
And pabulum drizzled over cooing ministers.
Slick, he slipped through cracks in bad news
And popped up gleaming like a televangelist,
While acting Laurier with an Alley Oop
scowl—
“Le p’tit gars” orating, “C’est de la bullshit,”
His speech spitting clarity like pepper spray.
His Canada was cant and cannot,
A Parliament of lepers and peons,
A politics of nothing doing
Cos doing nothing means nothing’s wrong.
He was the perfect mime of a prime minister,
Choosing to ape the mannerisms of the dead,
To shuffle, zombie-like, into *History*,
Through a labyrinth of fun-house mirrors
Stuttering his forged, misshapen greatness.

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an uncertain future. Even those promises that reflect core values such as stability for national cultural institutions have not been ascertained. It remains unclear whether the individual pro-

grams bundled together under the umbrella of TST, the Chrétien government's most expensive and most publicized initiative, will be sustained in the Martin era. Most of the

initiatives introduced in Chretien's last mandate reflect broad Liberal policy objectives. If it is wise, the Martin government will continue to build on its predecessor's achievements. 


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Adams describes. Or he may have finally had it with the nation's neo-conservative elites as they were rather ungraciously replacing him with one of their own.

Whatever the impetus, the record of Chrétien's last year as prime minister was unlike anything in the nine years that preceded it—or in fact anything seen since the constitution came home. His final

legislative program was a litany of un-American activities: gun control, decriminalization of marijuana, same-sex marriage. It would have pleased the by-now beatified Trudeau. Chrétien's signing the Kyoto Accord and standing with the UN against the second Iraq war would have made Pearson proud if not envious.

As Chrétien left office, there was more

life left in Canadian nationalism than either he or his critics could have anticipated. "Canada's New Spirit," as *The Economist* called it in September 2003, was more than a feel good factor or a smokescreen for importing Republican policies. Fostering and defending a national identity might yet be the measure of a prime minister. 

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approach that sold "national unity" on top of more tangible products. Equally salient, Chrétien reversed course on NAFTA soon after he became prime minister. Rather than opening up the NAFTA issue to a wide-ranging discussion in Cabinet or the country, Chrétien chose decisively—and personally—to close the issue once and for all.

In other, especially non-economic, areas, considerable autonomy was allowed for activist ministers such as foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy. On issues such as the campaign to ban anti-personnel landmines and the initiative to create an International Criminal Court, Axworthy worked closely not with the United States but, in a new speeded up version of classic Canadian coalition building, with a loose grouping of like-minded countries and NGOs. On the more successful of these initiatives—above all the landmines case—Chrétien could bask in the glow of reflected glory without having expended much political capital, energy, or exposure to risks.

DEALING WITH THE AMERICANS

This search for balance comes out in most definitive fashion, however, in Chrétien's approach to dealing with the United States directly. In the aftermath of the shock and horror of 9/11, Chrétien

was willing to go along to satisfy US demands that Canada—with other allies—be onside with the war on terrorism. The Canada-US border was re-branded. Rather than just making contributions through naval and air forces, as had been the model in the Gulf War and Kosovo, Canada's commitment to the first Afghanistan operation contained not just deployment of a number of Canadian ships but the participation under US command of a 750-member "battle group" together with the deployment of personnel from the JTF2 (Joint Task Force Two).

Still, notwithstanding all the immense pressure from the Bush administration, Chrétien did not join the new coalition of the willing "Operation Iraqi Freedom." At one level, this resistance can be elevated to Chrétien idealistically adopting a value-based foreign policy, with Canada defined as a civilian/rules-based (or Kantian) state, increasingly disconnected and uneasy with US militarism

expressed in Hobbesian terms. At another—and more convincing level—the result can be attributed to Chrétien's impressive political and pragmatic instincts; a skillful calculation based especially on the unpopularity of the Iraqi intervention due to the sensibilities of Quebec, multicultural communities, and across an important gender divide.

When all is said and done, therefore, Chrétien's defining moment in foreign policy terms constituted a non-action—that is to say, what he was not prepared to do as opposed to any constructive design or strategy. The test for Paul Martin will be to raise the bar of Canada's position and role in the world. Just as the caution of Prime Minister Mackenzie King morphed into the so-called Pearsonian diplomatic golden age, the need is for a more decisive, creative, sustained, and operational focus on Canadian foreign policy in the post-Iraq and post-Chrétien period. 

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