THE GREAT DIVIDE

Individualism is an important value in both Canada and the United States. Americans have held and venerated values of individual autonomy since their nation’s inception. Canadians, on the other hand, have traditionally favoured more collectivist values and have been, as sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset has indicated, more deferential to institutional authority.

The divide between the two nations in this respect can, of course, be traced to the American Revolution. In electing to stand apart from this movement, Canadians essentially assented to the maintenance of old world Toryism, which values group identities over individual rights. This particular world view and the institutions that reflect this world view, along with the nation’s climate, geography, and smaller population, have made Canadians generally more accepting than Americans of state intervention in their daily lives. Individualism, an almost sacred value for many Americans, has yet to be mythologized to the same extent north of the 49th parallel, although numerous registers indicate that Canadians, in fact, place greater emphasis on personal freedom and harbour less deference to traditional institutions such as the state, the family, and religious organizations than do their American neighbours.

Today Americans are clinging to traditional institutions as anchors in a chaotic, changeable, and Darwinistic world. More vulnerable than Canadians to the vicissitudes of the market, Americans depend more than Canadians on the institutions (family, religion, and a harsh justice system) that offer stability and protection.

By contrast, Canadians are more readily rejecting traditional authority knowing that they, living in a more ordered and peaceable kingdom than the one to the south, may assert new social norms with comparatively little risk and fear.

CANADIANS ARE MORE READILY REJECTING TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY KNOWING THAT THEY, LIVING IN A MORE ORDERED AND PEACEABLE KINGDOM THAN THE ONE TO THE SOUTH, MAY ASSERT NEW SOCIAL NORMS WITH COMPAREDLY LITTLE RISK AND FEAR.

BIG DIFFERENCES STILL

One key feature that distinguishes Canadians’ social values from those of Americans is Canadians’ lesser and still diminishing commitment to traditional religious institutions. When polled,* Americans (48 percent) are more likely than Canadians (32 percent) to agree strongly that children should receive a religious education, and are more likely to consider themselves members of a religious faith (75 percent of Americans consider themselves members of a religious faith, compared with 64 percent of Canadians). Americans are also more likely to report that they often or sometimes meditate on the meaning of their lives, and that religious beliefs are very important to them. Even among Quebeckers, with their legendary Catholicism, religiosity is in precipitous decline.

One reason for the more serious decline in religiosity in Canada than in the United States is likely the nature of faith institutions in the two countries. The Catholic and Anglican churches, both extremely hierarchical organizations, have historically played a dominant role in Canadian life. They have done so with explicit government sanction, in part through constitutional provisions that protected Catholic and Protestant denominational schools.

By contrast, the American constitution separated church and state more starkly and so evangelical or populist sects had to compete for the attention and adherence of worshippers, thus lending religion in the United States a less institutional character.

In the past, this difference in the two countries’ faith organizations has favoured greater religiosity in Canada. With the power of religious ideology declining in both countries, however, the more fundamentalist orientation of religion in the United States has proven the more resilient and “market sensitive.” In Canada, mainstream Judeo-Christian denominations are losing their grip on the population and many of the values traditionally associated with these religious organizations have come under critical scrutiny; if they have not been discarded altogether. These values include deference to state authorities, patriarchal definitions of the family, guilt, duty, and fear of divine retribution.

THE FAMILY AND GENDER

Although common law unions and families including gay or lesbian partners are gaining acceptance on both sides of the border, on the whole Cana-
dians have adjusted their definition of the family to include these non-tradi-
tional domestic arrangements more readily than have Americans. When
asked whether society should regard people who live together without being
married as a family, 69 percent of Cana-
dians agree (29 percent disagree), com-
pared with only 52 percent of Ameri-
cans (almost half of U.S. respondents—
47 percent—disagree).

Polling data indicate that even Cana-
dians’ ideas about the traditional nu-
clear family are changing more rapidly
than those of Americans. While both
countries are moving away from a hier-
archical and patriarchal model of the
family unit, Canadians have moved
more rapidly from the conviction that
father knows best. When asked to agree
or disagree with the statement “The fa-
ther of the family must be master in his
own house,” fully 80 percent of Canadi-
ans disagreed. Most Americans also
disagreed, but the majority was weaker:
55 percent of American respondents
disagreed with the statement while 44
percent agreed that father must rule,
compared with only 20 percent in Cana-
dia. These numbers offer strong
evidence of Canada’s moral decay in
the minds of this country’s “social con-
servatives.”

Also significant to the issue of hier-
archy within the family is the fol-
dowing datum: when asked to agree or disa-
gree with the statement “Good parents
make and enforce strict rules for their
children,” 37 percent of Americans
agreed strongly, compared with only 22
percent in Canada. These numbers offer strong
evidence of Canada’s moral decay in
the minds of this country’s “social con-
servatives.”

IDENTITY AND HIERARCHY

With respect to fluidity on gender iden-
tity, when asked to agree or disagree
with the statement “It’s perfectly nor-
mal for even the most masculine man
to demonstrate what are thought of as
feminine qualities,” almost three-
quarters (74 percent) of Canadians
agreed (23 percent disagreed), while
65 percent of Americans agreed (33
percent disagreed). In the same vein,
when asked to agree or disagree with
the statement “I don’t like seeing men
and women who dress and behave so
much alike that I have trouble telling
them apart,” less than one-quarter of
Canadians (23 percent) agreed total-
ly, while 37 percent of Americans agreed
totally. Thus, in terms of gender roles,
Canadians exhibit greater tolerance
than Americans.

Under traditional patriarchy, the
family and indeed gender itself have
been sites at which hierarchy has en-
trenched itself as a dominant mode of
organization. As Canadians increas-
ingly reject hierarchy in the private
sphere of the family, they may also be
seen, more than their American coun-
terparts, to eschew the idea of hierar-
chy in the workplace.

There is a stark division between
Canadians and Americans on the issue
of heterarchy versus hierarchy. Canadi-
ans are much more likely to embrace
heterarchical modes of organization—
that is, models in which there is no sin-
gle leader and in which tasks are as-
signed based on the interests and ex-
perience of those involved, while
Americans are more likely to appreci-
ate the clarity of a hierarchical chain of
command. When asked to agree or
disagree with the statement “In organi-
zations, things work better when there
is no single leader in charge,” almost
half (47 percent) of Canadians agreed,
compared with only 19 percent of Ameri-
icans.

This pattern of pluralism north of the
border and greater demand for con-
formity south of the border holds in
other areas as well. The two countries’
different approaches to immigration are
well known: while the United States has
attempted to create a melting pot of inte-
gration and assimilation, Canada has
striven to create a multicultural mosaic
in which immigrants maintain many of
the values and customs of their nations
of origin.

Most Canadians (59 percent) agree
with the statement “Our country would
be a better place if ethnic groups main-
tained their cultural identities”; slightly
less than half (49 percent) of Americans
agree. An unwillingness to welcome
non-white immigrants is also slightly
more common in the United States.
When asked to agree or disagree with the
statement “Non-white immigrants
should not be allowed to immigrate to
our country,” 11 percent of Canadians
agreed (87 percent disagreed) while al-
most one-quarter (23 percent) of Ameri-
cans agreed (77 percent disagreed).

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When it comes to welfare, the “truly needy” have become the exotic object of our collective concern. They exist in rhetoric, contrasted against the fraudulent claims made by the “lazy pregnant cheats” of political lore. On both sides of the border, governments encourage our suspicions about the “undeserving.”

When it comes to welfare, the “truly needy” have become the exotic object of our collective concern. They exist in rhetoric, contrasted against the fraudulent claims made by the “lazy pregnant cheats” of political lore. On both sides of the border, governments encourage our suspicions about the “undeserving.”

DIVERSITY AND PATRIOTISM

But this greater willingness on the part of Canadians to accept diversity, as well as Canada’s lesser inclination to demand ardent patriotism of its citizens, does not necessarily indicate that Canadians are apathetic about Canada as a nation. Rather, and paradoxically, they feel strongly about their weak attachments to the state, its institutions, and their fellow citizens. They feel strongly about the right to live in a society that allows its citizens to be detached from ideology or critical of organizations, and in which they do not feel obliged to be jingoistic or sentimentally patriotic.

While the recent popularity of Molson’s ostensibly nationalistic “Joe” character may seem to controvert the widely held view that Canadians take an understated pride in their country, this young man is more a parody than an example of the patriot. After all, at the conclusion of his rant tinged with self-deprecation, what does Joe do but thank his audience for having listened—a nod to the stereotype of the mild and courteous Canadian that undercuts whatever flag waving he may have attempted during the preceding address. But Joe, if not a classic chest-beating hero, certainly hasn’t failed in the task of telling us something about ourselves. It is of course Canadians’ very lack of nationalism, particularly when compared with Americans’ famous patriotism, that is in its own way a distinguishing feature of the country.

Quite simply, Canadians are pragmatic rather than ideological. They desire a sustainable welfare state, perhaps not the social-democratic paradise envisioned by the Canadian left, but certainly not the almost unfettered free market that exists to the south. Although there has been a turn to the right of the political spectrum in Canada during recent years, rather than a sign of increased Americanization, this seems to be a symptom of Canada’s adapting to the forces of globalization in much the same way as other social-welfare states, such as Germany, New Zealand, and Sweden. Canadians do have a distinct vision of what their country should be, but part of that very vision is that they should not have to wave flags in order to convince others of their dedication to the ideals of their country.

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* All data drawn from Environics’s 1996 3SC social values survey of representative samples of Canadians and Americans aged 15 and older.