

# Canadian and American social values

## 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.

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## 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 some-

times meditate on the meaning of their lives, and that religious beliefs are very important to them. Even among Quebecers, 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-traditional 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 Canadians agree (29 percent disagree), compared with only 52 percent of Americans (almost half of U.S. respondents—47 percent—disagree).

Polling data indicate that even Canadians' ideas about the traditional nuclear family are changing more rapidly than those of Americans. While both countries are moving away from a hierarchical 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 father of the family must be master in his own house," fully 80 percent of Canadians 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 Canada. These numbers offer strong evidence of Canada's moral decay in the minds of this country's "social conservatives."

Also significant to the issue of hierarchy within the family is the following datum: when asked to agree or disagree with the statement "Good parents make and enforce strict rules for their children," 37 percent of Americans agreed strongly, compared with only 22 percent of Canadians. Clearly, Americans are at present less willing to abandon the traditional family structure than are Canadians.

## IDENTITY AND HIERARCHY

With respect to fluidity on gender identity, when asked to agree or disagree with the statement "It's perfectly normal 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

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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 totally, 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 entrenched itself as a dominant mode of organization. As Canadians increasingly reject hierarchy in the private sphere of the family, they may also be seen, more than their American counterparts, to eschew the idea of hierarchy in the workplace.

There is a stark division between Canadians and Americans on the issue of heterarchy versus hierarchy. Canadians are much more likely to embrace heterarchical modes of organization—that is, models in which there is no single leader and in which tasks are assigned based on the interests and experience of those involved, while Americans are more likely to appreciate the clarity of a hierarchical chain of command. When asked to agree or

disagree with the statement "In organizations, things work better when there is no single leader in charge," almost half (47 percent) of Canadians agreed, compared with only 19 percent of Americans.

This pattern of pluralism north of the border and greater demand for conformity 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 integration 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 maintained 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 almost one-quarter (23 percent) of Americans agreed (77 percent disagreed).

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going to be terminated because I didn't have the documents in. They didn't want to hear any explanation.

In past contracts, Andersen Consulting has helped governments privatize and contract out functions in the welfare system like employment counseling and training, job preparation, and even the administration of the program itself. The following observation appeared in *The New York Times* in 1996:

Before the new welfare law, moving people from welfare to work was the domain of nonprofit organizations and three relatively small businesses (America Works, Curtis and Associates, and Maximus). Now, some large companies see a potentially multibillion-dollar industry that could run entire welfare programs for states and counties.

### CONCLUSION

In both Canada and the United States, "welfare repeal" is taking hold not just in policy, but in the public imagination.

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."

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ing." Welfare is now very rarely upheld as a fundamental right of citizenship. Rather, welfare is a tab that every level of government would rather not pay. And it is certainly an expense that governments' encourage their taxpaying citizens to scorn. The answer to "how low can we go?": there is no bottom. ❖

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### 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. ❖

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