

## AN ORPHANED DOMINION

*by Robin Winks*

Most Canadian intellectuals profess to find their country's history as dull as dishwater. But, in fact, it is a very interesting history, and one of its most intriguing aspects is the obsessive search by Canadians, especially Canadian intellectuals, for a "national identity."

Apparently, Canadians believe that all other nations have one and, hence, know exactly what they are all about. Canadians sense that they are somehow different. The editors of the Toronto-based news magazine, *Maclean's*, ran a contest some years ago asking readers to complete the sentence, "As Canadian as. . . ." The winning entry: "As Canadian as possible under the circumstances."

Canadians have tended in the past to view their identity in negative terms—as "not being like the United States"—and through the nostalgic glow of their ties to the once powerful British Empire. They also believe that they are set apart from the rest of the world by their English-French "biculturalism." It is not a unique condition. Canadians share biculturalism, and bilingualism, with South Africa, Belgium, and, increasingly, the southwestern United States, as well as with less familiar countries such as Cameroun and the Sudan.

During the past two decades, English- and French-speaking Canadians have discovered that what they long believed to be true of themselves was a mixture of fact and fiction. But this has only increased the fervor of those who would define, capture, invent, or otherwise create a "Canadian identity." They have followed the nationalist's usual path: asserting the moral superiority of their society; making language a tool of self-awareness; increasing the power of the state.

In politics, Canadians have been preoccupied by three issues. The first is the "patriation" of their Constitution, recently granted by the British Parliament. At bottom, this was only a symbolic issue—no British Parliament would have refused to approve any reasonable (or even unreasonable) amendment Ottawa wished to make—but this last vestige of colonialism irked many Canadians.

The real problem is the second issue: Whither Quebec? René Lévesque and his *Parti Québécois* want to move the province

into a relationship with the rest of Canada that, with magnificent obscurity, they style "sovereignty-association." No one is able to define precisely what this means. All agree, however, that it would bring far more independence to Quebec as a political entity.

The third issue is the taxing and pricing of oil and natural gas, which has pitted the west against Ottawa. The westerners are also angry over Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's concessions to Quebec, such as allowing the province to restrict the use of English.

None of this is really new. Canada has always run the risk of being, as *Forbes* magazine called it recently, "one nation divisible." The Canadian flag ought not to display a maple leaf, some say, but a boxing glove. There have always been politicians and entrepreneurs in the United States who have thought that Canada, like the fruit of Shakespeare's medlar tree, would become rotten before it became ripe and fall into the American Union. Yet somehow it never did.

Canadian intellectuals have always been ambivalent about their culture, often putting it down (though not wishing anyone



Public Archives of Canada.

Quebec as it appeared around 1700. American attempts to take the city in 1775 are forgotten in the United States, not in Canada.

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else to do so), and declaring what they are not: not American; not British; not French. But they are not so sure what they *are*. As one Canadian has remarked, Americans at least thought they knew what the purpose of the House Committee on Un-American Activities was, since they could generally agree on what it meant to be an American. But who could imagine a Royal Commission on Un-Canadian Activities?

### The "Quiet Revolution"

History does set Canada apart in several obvious ways, even if these differences are not as pronounced as Canadian history textbooks tend to portray them.

There is, for example, the fact of Canada's dual culture. Many Canadians think this unfortunate, and yet in some ways the situation is a blessing. Despite the mystique about "two solitudes" in Canada, with neither culture speaking to the other, there is in fact a constant dialogue, often at the top of the lungs, that is unmatched in most other bicultural societies.

Many western Canadians refuse to learn French and decry the Liberal Party's efforts in Ottawa to turn Canada into a bilingual nation. French-speaking Canadians still learn English, mostly because it is rapidly becoming the world's *lingua franca* of trade and technology. They may be the only truly bilingual Canadians. Learning a second language seems a waste of time when the "other party" can already speak one's own first language, but one day English-speaking Canadians will realize that they will have to give way. If Paris was worth a mass (as the Protestant Prince Henri decided when he was offered the French throne in 1574 on condition that he convert to Catholicism), Canada is probably worth learning to speak French.

But language is not really the issue. The issue is mutual cultural respect. It is unfortunate that Canada chose to call itself a Dominion in 1867 (a title quietly dropped in recent years), with the Biblical connotation of having "dominion from sea to sea." Domination is what the debate has been all about: the centuries-old presumption by English-speaking Canadians that their culture was expansive, innovative, and most likely to develop a true Canadian identity, and that the "other culture" was

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conservative, priest-ridden, rural.

Goldwin Smith, a misguided British-born 19th-century historian, wrote that "French Canada is a relic of the historical past preserved by isolation, as Siberian mammoths are preserved in ice." So long as French-Canadians kept to themselves in their preserve of Quebec, the rest of Canada could go its own Anglophile way. But the *Québécois* did not wish their province to remain forever a cultural enclave, and with the "quiet revolution" that began in the 1950s they began to assert themselves.

Some of the separatists took up the language of Marxism because they meant it, some because they knew it would ring in Canadian ears like a fire bell, and some because they believed it would provide a fashionable vocabulary of protest. (Not all separatists claim to be Marxists, though.) But the issue was not language, and it was not Marx; it was whether two genuinely different cultures could coexist within a single state.

Long before, Lord John ("Radical Jack") Durham had said they could not, in his famous 1839 *Report* on the causes of and remedies for the rebellions of 1837 in Canada.\* The Americans seemed to confirm this judgment when the clash between their own cultures of North and South resulted in Civil War. But by the 1970s, in the context of post-Cold War international politics, Canadians had to ask themselves whether they could afford *not* to coexist within the bosom of a single state. The alternative was political fragmentation, loss of influence in the world, and possibly even piecemeal absorption by the United States.

### Waving the Flag

Originally, it was Canada that threatened the United States, to use modern political terms for an older geography. The French had settled New France (largely, present-day Quebec), while the English had settled the eastern seaboard from Nova Scotia south to Georgia. By moving beyond those seaboard colonies, down the Mississippi River to Louisiana, the French had cut off British access to the far west. The British called this "the Gallic Peril." It was eliminated only toward the end of the Great War for Empire—a series of five wars beginning in 1689 and fought mostly in Europe, culminating in the Seven Years' War of 1753–60. By that time, there were some one million British colonists in North America and about 70,000 French.

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\*The rebellions, led by William Lyon Mackenzie in English Canada and by Louis Joseph Papineau in French Canada, arose out of demands for greater local autonomy. They enjoyed scant public support and were quickly put down. Lord Durham, however, sympathized with the aims and recommended that Canada be granted more self-governing powers.

### OTTAWA'S VIEW OF THE WORLD

"Ever since the Second World War, Canada has been cultivating the image of an international nice guy," Canada's External Affairs Minister, Flora MacDonald, declared in 1979. "We're friends to everyone, the honest brokers."

Inevitably, the United States looms large. The two nations are linked through NATO (1949) and by the 1958 North American Air Defense (NORAD) pact. Some 25,000 Canadian servicemen served alongside the Americans in Korea. After the Soviets' 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, Ottawa joined Washington in boycotting the Moscow Olympics and embargoing wheat shipments to Russia. Opinion polls indicate that 60 percent of the Canadian public favors such close ties to the United States. To Moscow, the country seems a pliant U.S. ally. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko once called Canada "the boring second fiddle in the American symphony."

Ottawa has tried, nevertheless, to keep a certain distance from the United States. As the British writer V. S. Pritchett observed, "The Canadian spirit is cautious, observant, and critical where the American is assertive; the foreign policies of the two nations are never likely to fit very conveniently." During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Ottawa refused to participate in an alert of the joint NORAD system, and in 1963, over Washington's objections, it arranged sizable grain deals with the Soviet Union and China. In 1968, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau cut Canada's 10,000-man NATO contingent, largely based in West Germany, by 50 percent. As a proportion of government outlays, only Luxembourg spends less on NATO than Canada does, though recently Ottawa has been modernizing its forces.

Citing a tradition of "international altruism"—the nation's 1981 foreign aid budget (\$1.2 billion) is the world's fifth-largest—Canadians have often been more accommodating than Americans toward the Third World. In 1975, Trudeau backed demands for a New International Economic Order, urging "an acceptable distribution of the world's wealth." He caused an uproar at home (and in Washington) a year later by crying "Viva Castro!" during a speech in Cuba. Canada's ties with Caribbean nations are surprisingly strong, although most foreign aid still goes to Bangladesh, Pakistan, and other British Commonwealth countries, or, enhancing bicultural amity at home, to the French-speaking nations of West Africa. Canadian units have served in most United Nations peace-keeping forces, from Lebanon to Cyprus.

Yet world issues seldom stir much attention in Ottawa. The House of Commons did not once debate foreign policy between 1960 and 1977. And Trudeau himself has declared that Canada's "paramount interest" in foreign affairs was to "ensure the survival of Canada as a federal and bilingual state."

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Most Canadians term the war's result the British Conquest. The French colonists and their descendants have used a different word for this political transition: the *Cession*. Behind the alternative word lies an alternative view of history. The British felt that they had conquered New France fairly in war. The French settlers were convinced that France could have defended its North American colony successfully but that Mother France had elected to abandon her children in exchange for gains in Europe and Asia.

The French-Canadians were a bit like the Afrikaans-speaking Boers of South Africa, who felt distant from a Holland that cared little for their needs and who saw themselves not as Europeans but as white Africans. The French-Canadians sought to protect their culture with the bulwarks granted to them by Britain under the 1774 Quebec Act: their own legal code, their religion, and their language. The British tried leniency to secure the loyalty of their new subjects, and it worked. According to an old cliché, the last hand to wave the British flag in North America should be that of a French-speaking Canadian.

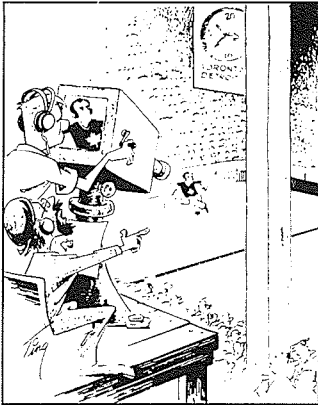
### **Independence by Installment**

The cliché had substance for a very long time, partly because the expanding United States, pursuing its "Manifest Destiny" before the Civil War, posed a threat to Canada, and especially to French-speaking Canadians. Were the British North American Provinces (as they were called) to be absorbed by the ravenous new Republic, the English-speaking Canadians would lose only their sovereignty and, perhaps, some of their property. The French-Canadians stood to lose their way of life. Thus, they had little choice but to remain loyal to the only available countervailing force: Great Britain. During the War of 1812, the Quebec Militia fought shoulder to shoulder with the redcoats, and as late as 1940, during the battle of Britain, the French-Canadian 22nd Regiment (the "Van Doos") stood guard at Buckingham Palace.

Meanwhile, English-speaking Canada was also developing along lines different from those of the United States. After the success of the American Revolution, an influx of some 30,000 Loyalists from the new United States helped ensure that Canada would, at least initially, be anti-American, property-conscious, loyal to the Crown, oriented to the extent possible toward Britain (not toward Europe, of which Britain thought itself no part), and politically conservative.

Americans, with brash dogmatism, have always insisted

CANADIAN SELF-PORTRAITS



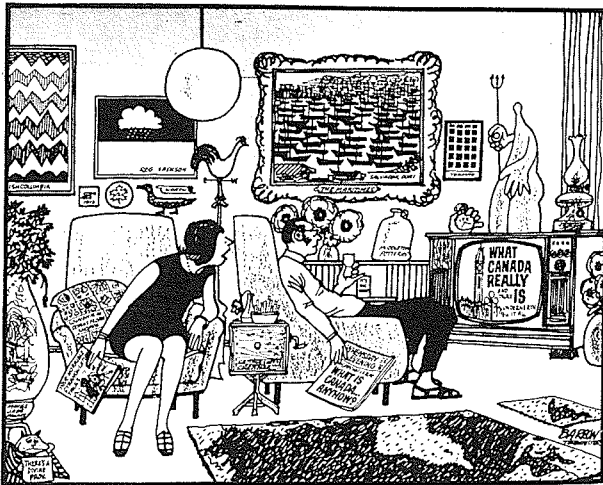
Courtesy London Free Press.

*"Stay with the Leafs. We gotta get our 60% Canadian content."*



Peterson/Vancouver Sun/1973.

*Pierre Trudeau*



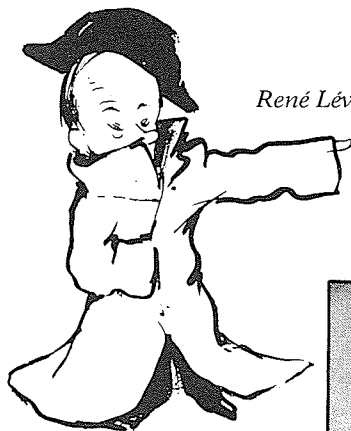
*"... you want to know what Canada is all about ... I'll tell you what it's all about ... it's YOU reading and listening to all these media people in Toronto telling you what Canada is all about ... THAT'S what it's all about ..."*

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The Toronto Star.



*"A little self-restraint,  
s'il vous plaît."*

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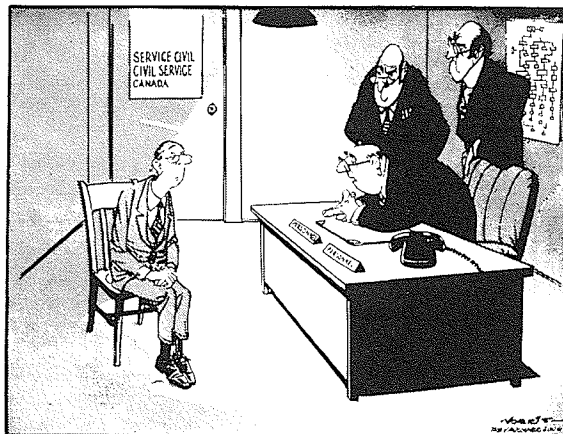


*René Lévesque*

*Hudon/Le Devoir/1961.*

*"We have ways of  
making you talk  
French . . ."*

*Norris/Vancouver Sun/Rothco/1972.*



*The Wilson Quarterly/Summer 1982*



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that they became independent on July 4, 1776. They could say that they became independent merely by declaring themselves to have become so, ignoring seven years of war and the 1783 treaty that truly conferred independence. Canadians looked on, a bit jealously, even as they themselves—French- and English-speaking alike—secured independence on the installment plan.

This is another cliché of Canadian history, though it is no less true for being one: that Canada is different from the United States because it acquired its independence through evolution rather than revolution.

Although Canadians celebrate July 1 as their national holiday (once called Dominion Day, now Canada Day) in honor of the promulgation of the British North America Act of 1867, Canada was in no significant sense independent then or for some time thereafter. Britain still held much of the land as Crown domain and could manipulate taxation. If Britain declared war, Canada was automatically at war as well (which is what happened at the outbreak of World War I in 1914). Surely one of the truest tests of independence is whether a people can decide for themselves whether to go to war.

### **Taking the High Road**

The confederation created in 1867 united only four of the British North American Provinces. It was really not until 1948—when Newfoundland, which had remained a separate dominion under Britain, elected to join—that the present nation was totally formed. Canada was an independent nation well before the Constitution was patriated this year, but constitutionalists can make good cases for arguing that this status was not reached until (take your pick) 1911, 1919, 1927, 1931, even 1939. It is not important to know when Canada became independent; it is important to understand that no one really knows.

Of course, no one really knows when Britain or France or Germany actually became a nation. Canadians are not alone in having to settle for an evolutionary definition of identity. They would probably not make so much of the issue were it not for the fact that it helps them to feel quietly superior to the Americans, who had to resort to violence.

This, too, is part of the Canadian character: a tension between putting oneself down and putting everyone else down. By many objective criteria, Canada *is* superior to the United States. It has far lower crime and divorce rates; it spends substantially more per capita on education and health; its parks are cleaner,

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its cities more pleasant, its highways better paved, its children better behaved. Canadians are particularly proud of their national health insurance plan, administered by the provinces (hospitalization insurance was established in 1961; medical insurance in 1965). There is far less venality in politics. Only two national Canadian politicians have ever been assassinated, and then not while in office.

But this is not enough for Canadians. They must also be seen as *morally* superior. Thus, evolution is better than revolution; Americans are ignorant of Canada but Canadians consider themselves quite well-informed about the United States (a half-truth); the Mountie always gets his man, while the American cop on the beat is a crook or an incompetent. The Canadian writer George Woodcock summed up his countrymen's attitude in 1970, when he wrote of Canada's "great potential role in the world, not as a leader so much as an exemplar, a country conditioned to politics as a process of cooling and reconciliation."

There is no better symbol of this peculiar quest for moral superiority than a historic plaque on the banks of the Detroit River, where the industrial city of Windsor, Ontario, faces Detroit's downtown Renaissance Center. The plaque is dedicated to the fugitive slaves "who found freedom under the lion's paw" by making their way on the Underground Railroad to Canada during the 1850s. The plaque, like most Canadian monuments and history books, ignores the fact that the schools of Canada West (as Ontario was called) were segregated at the time, that chattel slavery was legal in Canada until 1833, and that patterns of racial prejudice in Canada were (and are) similar to those in the Northern United States.

### "Vital Lies"

At the beginning of the 20th century, Canadians identified themselves as a linchpin or golden hinge in a "North Atlantic Triangle." These constructions "explained" how Canada was a midpoint between Europe and North America; they implied that Canada followed the path of peace, was a mediator, a showcase to the world of how cultures (and therefore nations) could coexist. Such constructions were partly true, at different times, but no longer.

The new Canada differs from the historic, stolid Canada in important ways. Just as in the United States, where a portion of the population does not realize that the old America of the frontier is gone, there are Canadians who do not recognize that the old happy Canada is gone. History has become myth, or what

### A CITY UPON A PLAIN

*The English writer V. S. Pritchett, visiting Canada in 1964, described a Winnipeg that is little changed today. Canada's fifth-largest city lies 150 miles north of Grand Forks, North Dakota:*

In this hot, dusty growing city of half a million, one meets at last a real, well-rooted Canada. Winnipeg is not as polished as Toronto or anywhere near as sophisticated as Montreal, but it is as individual as all other Canadian cities and puts the fundamental Canadian case. The first things to catch the eyes are the onion domes of the Russian Orthodox churches of the Ukrainians. Here the non-British immigrant becomes important. The Ukrainians came here in 1900 from the richest wheat-bearing lands of Russia. . . . Up at Selkirk, on Lake Winnipeg, are the Scandinavians and Icelanders; in the city itself is a new Jewish population, as well as the German and Italian settlers who arrived in the last few years. The original population includes a very strong outpost of French-Canadians, the descendants of French marriages with Indians and of the men of the fur trade. . . .

Flying out of Winnipeg you get one more shock to the eye. First of all, the city spreads for miles as if it were printed on the land. The print moves out to the scrub and forest of the Shield, the enormous slab of pre-Cambrian rock that stretches to Hudson Bay. . . . The second shock is the sight of thousands of lakes, gay eyelets of blue looking out of the face of vegetation, and you realize how much of Canada is wild water. It is forest and lake all the way to the Great Lakes, and hardly a road anywhere. There must be trails of some sort, for occasionally there is the white speck of a settlement. The Great Lakes themselves are forest bound. One understands why this country was crossed by water first, not by land.

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U.S. historian Hans Kohn called "vital lies," essential parts of a nation's sense of identity.

Three developments have destroyed the old truths: immigration, the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the new power of oil-rich nations. If Canadians are able to adapt to these conditions, the 21st century may yet be theirs, as they once insisted the 20th would be.

The most important problem remains the dual culture, now changed by postwar immigration. It was not Marxist rhetoric, or the Cold War, or the Catholic Church's suicidal opposition to labor unions, strikes, and reforms in Quebec that shocked French-speaking Canadians into looking squarely at the question of cultural survival. It was the great wave of post-World War II immigration into Canada from virtually everywhere: Britain, Holland, Eastern Europe, Italy, Greece, the British West

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Indies, Haiti. During the 19th century, the French had made up nearly one-third of the total population of Canada, and—in part through a conscious pursuit of a high birthrate (the “revenge of the cradles”)—they had maintained this ratio.\* In Parliament, the united votes of the West and Ontario were still required to overcome the opposition of Quebec’s legislators on matters the latter deemed threatening to French-Canadian *survivance*.

### Savoring the Uncertainty

Immigration changed all this. The French had expected that the new immigrants would distribute themselves in roughly equal numbers across the provinces. Quebec would maintain its relative power within the confederation. *Québécois* also assumed that many immigrants would arrive knowing French, the second language of many Europeans, and that many others would choose to assimilate into French-speaking rather than English-speaking Canada.

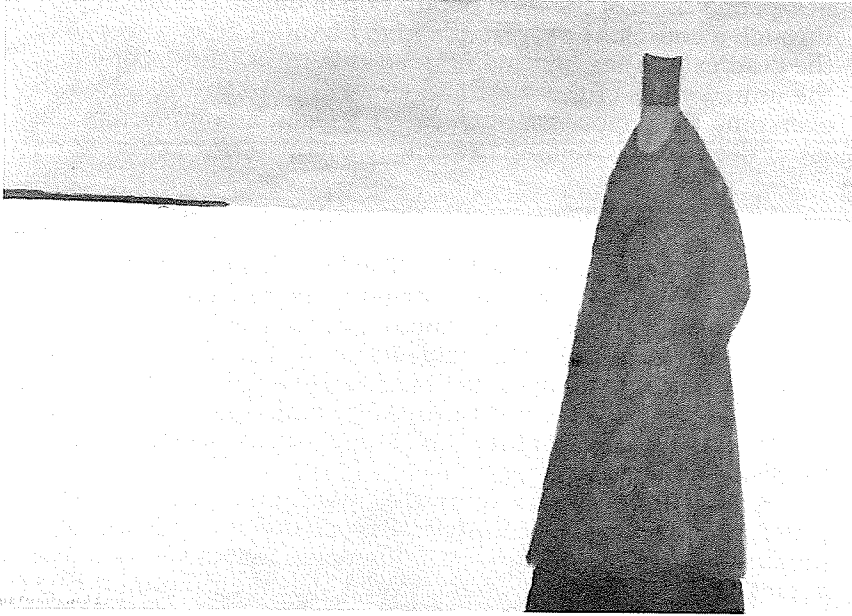
By 1960, it was evident this would not be the case. Immigrants—especially Eastern Europeans and the Dutch—preferred to maintain their own languages and customs to the extent that they could.† To the extent that they couldn’t, they generally chose to learn English, for two reasons. It was rapidly becoming the world’s second language, and since many immigrants came to Canada as a way station on the road to the United States, being able to speak it would improve their chances of making the next step. By 1971, two years after the formation of the *Parti Québécois*, and five years before the PQ won power, nearly a third of the Canadian population was neither French- nor English-speaking in origin. It was a vast new Canada that, as the French-Canadians had feared, would opt for the English rather than the French route if forced to choose.

Even moderate French Canadians, alerted to the danger by census statistics and school registration data, judged that the time had come to take steps to protect their culture. Such protection, they concluded, would best be afforded not by waving the British flag but by taking giant strides toward institutionalizing a separate identity. That was the impetus behind the growth of the *Parti Québécois*.

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\*“During the last two centuries,” notes demographer Jacques Henripin, “world population has multiplied by three, European population by four, and French-Canadian population by 80.” Since the 1950s, the growth rate has slowed to nearly zero.

†Today, immigration to Canada is down to about 100,000 annually, half the level of the early 1960s. Pakistanis, West Indians, Vietnamese refugees, and other nonwhites account for 40 percent of new arrivals.



National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

*Le visiteur du soir (The Night Visitor) by J. P. Lemieux.*

Were René Lévesque never to hold another referendum, never to define “sovereignty-association,” he would have achieved what must have been his major goal: concessions—on language and local governance—significant in their own right, but also so angering to the remainder of Canada as to loosen the confederation and give Quebec even more room for maneuver.

At the same time, had the world not been polarized into two camps after World War II, things might have been different. Canada might have developed in another way; it might have accommodated Quebec more easily. But the end of the war “placed Canada directly between the United States and its late ally and inevitable rival, the Soviet Union,” observed Canadian historian W. J. Morton.

With its fate so closely tied by defense needs and geography to that of the United States, Canada was not entirely free to pursue its own path, either at home or abroad. Dependent on

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U.S. investments, it could not evolve gradually toward socialism, as some Canadian intellectuals thought it would, and it could not be cavalier about forging stronger links to the Third World. Canada's U.S. ties prevented Ottawa from even thinking about making common cause with OPEC after 1973, for instance, and this restraint in profiting at the expense of the Yankees (and Canadians in the nonproducing provinces) was and is a key cause of the western provinces' threats to unravel the country.

It is an irony of Canadian history that so much of it has been influenced by the nations—first Great Britain, then the United States—that bought its exports. Canada's freedom of choice has been further restricted by the realities of the world markets for the succession of raw materials, from furs to codfish to timber to minerals, that the country sold abroad. In its next phase, the history of Canada may be determined as much by the course of OPEC and the world price of oil as from sharing a continent with and relying upon the United States. When oil prices go up, the Westerners will try to drive a harder bargain. When prices go down, the Canadian economy will suffer.

Canada's traditional common values—based on an Anglo-Saxon heritage and membership in a powerful empire—are slipping away. Nothing can readily take their place. In the years ahead, Canadians must have the courage to remain—perhaps even to truly become—pluralistic, respectful of, even drawing strength from, the fissiparous qualities of Canadian economic and political life. To remain the superior people Canadians consider themselves to be (and probably are), they must be willing to be unpredictable, taking joy from their ambiguities, finding tolerance in their duality, and content to have no single, embracing national identity.

