Canadian Politics at the 150th Anniversary of Confederation

Blame Canada! An Occasionally Serious Overview of US-Canada Relations

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“Canada, the country you think about so little” – John Oliver

An unaccustomed spark of celebrity animated Canadian politics in 2015 when Justin Trudeau, son of Pierre Elliot Trudeau, led the Liberal Party to its first parliamentary majority since 2006. Since the election, the new Prime Minister has added a touch of glamor to a country whose politics are earnest but perhaps just a little dull.

This northern version of Camelot has much work to do, however, as a number of tensions have emerged with the nation that matters most to Canada—the United States. Americans are largely unaware of these challenges, but we can hardly be blamed, as this would require us to notice Canada. Ignorance is not always bliss, however, and how these issues are managed will have considerable implications for prosperity and security in both nations. Examples include:

1. A number of high-profile spats in the new century ranging from Iraq policy to softwood imports to ballistic missile shields.
2. In one of the last acts of the Bush White House, the United States declared the Arctic an international waterway, thereby rebuffing Canadian sovereignty claims.
4. The United States and Canada are disputing the ownership of an outcropping of rocks near Maine. In fact, Wikipedia has a page dedicated to “List of areas disputed by Canada and the United States,” which includes five items.
5. President Trump has pledged to renegotiate NAFTA, and while most commentary focuses on the US and Mexico, trade between the US and Canada is larger. Both nations have much at stake, but Canada will be particularly worried about suffering collateral damage in a dispute that is largely about the US-Mexico relationship.

As academics, we might try to understand such disputes through boring, nerdy research, but to paraphrase UK Brexit leaders, we don’t need no stinkin’ experts. Instead, why not follow the lead of an animated cartoon (South Park 1999) and Blame Canada. Is there a case for vilifying our cold-to-the-touch but warm-of-heart neighbors to the north? Are the US and Canada entering a new (very) Cold War?

The answer is Yes, and it is all Canada’s fault!

Evidence of Canadian disdain for our values is right in front of our eyes (and ears). For instance, the lyrics of the Canadian national anthem include the line “We stand on guard for thee,” but if you listen carefully, Canadians actually sing “We stand on God for thee.” Why Canadians want to keep Him down is uncertain, but this is undoubtedly a swipe at American religiosity. In fact, Canadians are probably mentally spelling the word as “god” or even “g’d,” which just adds insult to injury.

Canadians are also infiltrating our cultural institutions. Exhibit A: Canadians in Hollywood. Many celebrities we think are Americans are in fact Canadians. The list includes William Shatner, Keanu Reeves, Michael J. Fox, Pamela Anderson, Tommy Chong, Donald Sutherland, Kim Cattrall—need I go on? Literally thousands of Canadians are pouring across our border ever year, many heading straight to Hollywood. One day, a critical mass of entertainers will be Canadian, and they will subtly socialize our culture.

The US government understands this threat. For many years—and this is actually true—newly-inaugurated presidents visited Canada before any other nation. This was essential spy
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craft, a way to keep our friends close but our enemies closer. George W. Bush, however, went to Mexico first and look what happened to his presidency. Barack Obama took this lesson to heart and visited Canada on February 19, 2009.

Why do Canadians hate us and plot against us?
The main reason is hockey. It is the national sport of Canada, but most Americans do not realize that it is played in the United States. Nevertheless, two NHL teams moved from Canada to America in the mid-1990s. The Winnipeg Jets moved to Phoenix, where the team played before packed crowds in bankruptcy court. The Québec Nordiques moved to Colorado, where at least there is snow. In the meantime, the NHL expanded into hockey-mad south-of-the-border venues like Atlanta, Miami, Nashville, Tampa Bay, and soon—hold on to your toques—Las Vegas! While the Atlanta Thrashers recently moved to Winnipeg and became the Jets, Canadians are not appeased. Imagine the outcry if MLB teams moved north. What would Americans think of the Yellowknife Yankees, the Regina Red Sox, or the (Socialized) Medicine Hat Mets? Now you understand why Canadians are angry.

They cover it up with politeness, but they doth protest too much. As John Candy said in Canadian Bacon (1995), “If you say please one more time, I’m going to let you have it.” In so many respects, this film was right on the money. However, because most movie reviewers are probably Canadian (see above discussion of Hollywood) and want to deter viewership, the film has a 14% rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Don’t listen, America.

The “kindler, gentler, nation” of the north may one day prove to be anything but. It could even send its huge army south and annex our territory, as we once did to Mexico. Politicians in Ottawa (the capital of Canada—no, it’s not Toronto) will then change our political system, abolishing our beloved Electoral College and giving us multiple party choices on the ballot. We will also be ruled by Prime Ministers, who have most recently been (1) a born-again Christian conservative (Stephen Harper) and (2) the son of a former leader (Justin Trudeau). Can we survive such un-American outcomes?

Canadians worry that 90% of their population lives within a two day march from the US border. But this means most Canadians can march to the US in two days—it is we who should Stand on Guard. And it is undoubtedly Canadian spies in Congress who are trying to distract us by constantly pointing to the US-Mexico border. Nice try, eh, but I’ve got my eye on Vancouver, Windsor, and Niagara Falls (these are cities in Canada).

But the real threat is not military—it is our ignorance. Lulled by images of beavers, Mounties, and maple syrup, Americans know almost nothing about our largest trading partner and our longest border. Is Canada an icy Sword of Damocles, or is it a friend we haven’t quite met?

Maybe we should be studying Canada—its culture, its politics, its economy, and especially its huge army. America’s security and prosperity depend on building relationships, and what better place to start than right next door. Rather than taking the UK approach of #Brexit, maybe we should try #HugCanada.

If you are still reading this Introduction, congratulations. The seven essays in this symposium will get you started on your new status as Canada Expert. Please enjoy the professional adulation and career success that will undoubtedly follow.

This symposium is the latest of three efforts in PS: Political Science & Politics to urge political scientists to pay more attention to Canada and US-Canada relations. The first appeared in 1993 (“The Canadian Constitutional Crisis,” edited by Kent Weaver) and the second in 2006 (“The Politics of Canada,” edited by David Leal). Nevertheless, political science has yet to heed such calls. To quote myself (Leal 2006, 813), “asking scholars to care about Canadian politics is like asking them to get a physical or eat more vegetables. Everyone agrees these are probably good ideas, but there is often a certain reluctance to comply.”

We begin with an essay by Harold Clarke, Timothy Gravelle, Thomas Scotto, and Marianne Stewart, “Like Father, Like Son: Justin Trudeau and Valence Voting in Canada’s 2015...
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Randall Hansen continues the discussion of immigration in his famous contrarian spirit. He claims the two main arguments explaining Canadians’ uniquely positive views of multiculturalism—a talent for dealing with diversity due to experience with the Quebec challenge, and the success of multiculturalism in integrating immigrants—are false. The first is false because Canada has failed to incorporate its “First Nations” peoples, and the second is false because Canadian support for multiculturalism is almost entirely rhetorical. He argues that Canada spends little on multicultural policies and that Canadians are naive to believe that its milquetoastian efforts can produce such integrative results. Instead, the federal government spends considerable sums on efforts that focus on integration, and migration policies select for migrants with high levels of education and skills. Public support for “multiculturalism,” he concludes, has more to do with a self-congratulatory Canadian search for a national identity rather than with any actual government policies.

The next two essays address Canadian federalism. Jennifer Wallner discusses how ideas about federalism can shape intergovernmental relations (IGR). More specifically, Stephen Harper as opposition leader had called for an “open federalism,” but did Canadian IGR change during his time in 24 Sussex? The essay finds that the federalism status quo, characterized by a “democratic deficit,” largely prevailed. The reality of federal-provincial interdependence, and conflicting policy priorities at the federal level, were obstacles too substantial for new federalism ideas to overcome.

Bartholomew Sparrow and Diane Sun then consider Canada as an expanding federation, a perspective that has gained little attention in the United States. The puzzle for scholars is that adding provinces and territories served to reduce the power of the national government, but add it did, and regularly so. Is the explanation national security, economics, or culture? Rather than pointing to a single reason, the essay posits that different provinces were added for different reasons—including security concerns, economic development, and cultural/nationalist ambitions. In doing so, the authors find parallels with the history of American state admission and thereby cast doubt on the claim that Canada followed a British “colonial” model of expansion.

The next essay, by Mebs Kanji and Kerry Tannahill, asks about the state of democracy in Quebec. Given the unique status of this province in Canada, we need to be concerned about Quebecer views of such systemic issues. A disaffected Quebec could be the precursor to dissatisfaction with its place in the federation and even lead to future independence movements. This is complicated, however, by the need to study not only how Quebecers view different levels of government and specific aspect of democracy but also according to language group. The authors find a variety of effects that defy easy categorization, which has the ring of authenticity. What they do not find is a simple dynamic of Quebec vs. the Rest of Canada or Francophones v. Anglophones. Instead, we see some differences in how Quebecers and Francophones evaluate government, but this depends on the level of government and the specific aspect of democracy.

Munroe Eagles and Nik Nanos conclude the symposium with a study of Canadian attitudes toward the United States. Noting both shared values and relationship imbalances, they also find changes over time. First, we see majority sentiment in both nations for cooperation across four particular policy areas. Second, Americans are more enthusiastic about policy cooperation than are Canadians, although the differences are larger for security-border-terrorism than for energy. Third, support for cooperation has increased in recent years, although more strongly among Canadians. The authors conclude that regardless of the views of political elites, public opinion provides a foundation for bilateral cooperation.

NOTES
2. On the other hand, Brent Scowcroft, in response to a question from Ali G. about whether the US should nuke Canada, responded that “we don’t have that in our arsenal anymore.” See videos on YouTube as well as “The Secret of Ali G.” in National Review. http://www.nationalreview.com/article/213926/secret-ali-g.
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