

Whether Canada?

Whether Canada? is a question that has been asked so often and for so long it has lost its import. The questions addressed in the symposium that follows are more ominous: *will* Canada survive? and *should* Canada survive? In other words: whether Canada?

Some readers will object that to even pose these questions is grossly irresponsible and will serve only to make likelier a consummation devoutly not to be wished. It is too late for such cavils, however; this genie is already out of the bottle. In just the last four months, it has been summoned by various political observers, including Gordon Gibson, Ted Byfield, Jeffrey Simpson, Mel Hurtig, Conrad Black, John McCallum and Diane Francis.

It is important to note what this symposium is not about: the dissolution of Canada following the separation of Quebec. That continuing crisis has existed at least since the election of the first Parti Québécois government in 1976—and, arguably, since the beginning of the Quiet Revolution four decades ago. It is not French-Canadian alienation that is under discussion here, but English-Canadian alienation.

Since 1960, Canada has undergone a fascinating transformation; a nation has been born in Quebec, while national sentiment has collapsed in the Rest of Canada. Quebec is not yet a sovereign polity and may never be—although it would be unwise to bet against it. English Canada, on the other hand, suffers from a profound malaise. Mr. Black put it nicely when he wrote that Canada has lost its *raison d'être*, its reason to exist.

What was Canada's *raison d'être*? Addressing the fears of Canadians on the eve of René Levesque's accession to power, Pierre Trudeau expressed it this way: "Our forefathers willed this country into being. Times, circumstances and pure will cemented us together in a unique national enterprise, and that enterprise, by flying in the face of all expectations, of all experience, of all common wisdom, that enterprise provides the world with a lesson in fraternity. This extraordinary undertaking is so advanced on the road to liberty, so advanced in the way of social justice and of prosperity, that to abandon it now would be to sin against the spirit, to sin against humanity."

What is most striking about this cry from the heart is how American it is. Canada, according to Mr. Trudeau, is a "proposition nation," a bold and perilous experiment. These beliefs were alien to Canadians until the 1960s; many Canadians reject them still. Indeed, it could be said that the New Canada, the "Just Society" that was to be a beacon unto the world, was a creation of the pure will of Mr. Trudeau himself.



Canada was a British dominion until 1951. Even at its 1967 centennial, one year before Mr. Trudeau's accession to power, it was still British in culture and institutions—in English Canada at least. The English Canadian population was, for better or worse, homogenous. Mr. Trudeau changed all that. He made Canada first bicultural, then multicultural; first bilingual, then multilingual. He made our Parliament and justice system American and our bureaucracy Continental European. He stripped Canada of its ancestral symbols (a process begun by his predecessor, Lester Pearson) and bequeathed a nation that had become a "mosaic."

Mr. Trudeau's understanding of "liberty" was alien to the British political tradition—not freedom to, but freedom from. As a consequence, Canada became an explicitly materialist entity, its worth to be judged by its fulfillment of "social justice"—as exemplified in its social programs. Mr. Trudeau and his partisans, nothing less than the entire English-Canadian elite, believed that from the ashes of the Dominion of Canada a new nation would be born.

It hasn't turned out that way. The cultural vacuum Mr. Trudeau left was filled, rather quickly, by

Americanism. The newly diverse Canada was not a peaceable kingdom; it was fractious and "unified" only by an ever burgeoning and ever more onerous federal government. Worst of all, the newly materialist Canada couldn't deliver the goods. Its social programs never became as generous as Mr. Trudeau's European models; the federal government no longer has the money to sustain what it has; and an increasing number of Canadians believe they pay too much for too little.

The late political philosopher Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn pointed out that the problem with defining a nation as an "experiment" is that experiments sometimes fail. If Canadians believe they are a "nation of losers," a cut-rate America richer in government and poorer in material goods, then the Canadian experiment will be over. But if Canada can retrieve its old *raison d'être*—or formulate a new one—it might be saved. Some believe it is already too late. It is in this spirit that we have asked nine eminent Canadians from across the political spectrum to answer the questions: will Canada survive? Should Canada survive? ■

KEVIN MICHAEL GRACE



Thomas Flanagan

From inertia, a new understanding

Canada is a nation founded upon an idea. The British-Canadian system of constitutional monarchy represented the opposite of the American system of revolutionary republicanism. Whereas the central principle of the American

experiment was liberty—both the personal freedom of individual choice and the collective freedom of self-rule—the central principle of the Canadian system was legal and constitutional continuity.

Although the Canadian idea of constitutional monarchy was great and noble, it had a fatal weakness—its vitality depended upon the strength of the British connection, which was bound to erode over the decades. The emergence of a separate Canadian citizenship after the Second World War effectively ended the original conception of the Canadian nation.

Our political class tried to concoct a replacement in the ideology of group rights—above all, in the compassionate welfare state.

Medicare became the sacred symbol of the new national identity. Canada was supposed to be a great nation because it provided for healthcare collectively, unlike the United States, where people had to purchase private health insurance. But we could not finance the welfare state with borrowed money forever, and Canada's claim to be a compassionate society seems increasingly hollow as our governments send our citizens to Buffalo and Cleveland for medical treatment.

Canada now lacks a clear idea of itself; but nations, once established, can survive on inertia for hundreds of years so long as there is no aggressive external threat to their existence. Having grown up American and then decided to become Canadian, I remain confident that inertia will carry Canada forward until a new and better self-understanding emerges to replace the failed group-rights ideology of the late 20th century.

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