

A Look at Our History Shows Canadians Have Earned the Right to Be Patriotic

By Conrad Black

The concept of Canadian patriotism has evolved steadily but gradually over more than 400 years.

When [Samuel de Champlain](#) founded Quebec in 1608, and in his 30 years as governor of New France, he was inspired by a vision of creating a great French state in the northern half of North America. As a writer, explorer, and cartographer, his vision was so persuasive that he gained the official and financial support of [Cardinal Richelieu](#), the all-powerful leader of the French state and the person who, more than anyone else, created the modern state. If Canada had not begun as a French colony, it would've been assimilated into the administration of the American colonies and become part of the United States. Certainly, that would not have been a dreadful fate, but it would have been the end of any notion of Canada as anything other than a region of the United States.



This 1797 engraving is based on a sketch made by Hervey Smyth, General Wolfe's aide-de-camp during the siege of Quebec. A view of the taking of Quebec, on Sept. 13, 1759. Library of the Canadian Department of National Defence

It was bound to be British eventually, because the strategic division between the two greatest nation states of Western Europe, prior to Bismarck's unification of Germany in 1871, was that France had the world's greatest army and the island kingdom of Great Britain the world's greatest Navy. This ultimately assured that the British took what they wanted overseas and the French were essentially consigned Britain's leavings. Thirty years after the death of Champlain, [Governor Louis de Frontenac](#) and the [intendant Jean Talon](#) made New France commercially self-sufficient and assured its demography by the importation of 1,000 nubile young ladies, from whom approximately 8 million people are descended today.

At approximately the time the American colonies became independent, New France had to become British, because only the British could have successfully protected the various settlements in Canada from being overrun by the Americans. Canada was preserved by the [Quebec Act of 1774](#), which the

then-governor of Canada, [Sir Guy Carleton](#), later Lord Dorchester, spent four full years on leave from his position lobbying for at the British Parliament.

The Quebec Act guaranteed the French population of Canada, then the great majority, preservation of its language, of the French civil law, and of the complete freedom of the Roman Catholic Church, in exchange for the population's loyalty to the British crown. This arrangement was scrupulously respected by both sides, and it was only with the leadership of Carleton and the loyalty of the French Canadians that the American Revolution was resisted, and Benjamin Franklin and the then-loyal revolutionary [Benedict Arnold](#) were sent packing from Montreal at the beginning of the Revolutionary War.

Canadian patriotism, under Carleton's leadership, maintained Champlain's vision of a different and in some respects a superior society to that of the Americans (though it was destined to be less populous and spectacular): It would be a bicultural state and would capitalize on the potential advantage of having two such eminent civilizations, the French and the English, arise and flourish together in the same vast country.

In order to secure the liberties of the population, the Canadians did not have the revolutionary option that the Americans had exercised, because, again, if Canada was not guaranteed by Britain, it would be quickly overrun by the Americans. This was demonstrated again in the War of 1812. The Americans had very considerable legitimate grievances against the British, but they could only take them out against us. And once again, it was a coalition of a modest British garrison—the loyal and determined French Canadians, and the now significant number of United Empire Loyalists who had departed America for Canada as they preferred the British crown to the American republic—that avoided American conquest of Canada.

In order to gain the right to responsible democratically elected government, as was enjoyed by the British and Americans, Canada had to have two Gilbert-and-Sullivan mini-revolts, which were obligingly led by [William Lyon Mackenzie](#) and [Louis-Joseph Papineau](#) in 1837. If they had been successful, Britain would have washed its hands of Canada and the United States would've taken over. The fact that they were not successful impressed the British with Canada's legitimate grievances and its loyalty. Queen Victoria's birthday is justly celebrated in Canada, as she was instrumental in granting responsible government for Canadians, as well as in promoting the Confederation of Canada in 1867 and its launch as an almost fully autonomous state.

From this point, Canadian patriotism was essentially a rationalization for why Canada should exist as an independent country given that English-speaking Canadians were almost indistinguishable culturally from Americans in northern U.S. states. But the psychology was different and so was the scale. Our patriotism remained based on building a democratic and humane society, taking advantage of both our cultures, and retaining adherence to the non-violent tradition of our national origins, while reflecting some British, American, and French influences, but growing spontaneously.

Our independence was not won by armed revolution, and as there was never any economic justification for slavery in Canada (manual harvesting of tropical crops), there was practically no slavery apart from among the indigenous peoples, which was abolished. New France had approximately 60 slaves, but with a method of self-emancipation through indentured work. Slavery was abolished in Upper Canada (Ontario), by Governor Simcoe on his own authority in 1791 and in the British Empire in 1833. There is no one in Canada who came here or whose ancestors came here involuntarily.

Canada was and remains the only transcontinental bicultural parliamentary Confederation in the history of the world and of

countries with 20 million or more people, and has the third oldest continuous political institutions after the United Kingdom and the United States. And in the 158 years of our Confederation, the UK lost just one of its provinces, Ireland, and our Confederation was launched immediately after the United States had endured a terrible [civil war](#) in which 750,000 people died in a population of 31 million to prevent the secession of the southern states.

It has been a remarkable achievement to keep pace with the astounding and unprecedented growth of the United States. We had one-fifteenth the population of the United States in 1900 and have approximately one-eighth of their population now. And with 41 million people, we certainly have the critical mass needed to be an influential nationality in the whole world, though we have not in fact quite got there. The failings and introspection of aspects of the American system in recent years have also made it a less intimidating subject of comparison.

We should now be on the verge of having a rational and balanced patriotism based on what this country has accomplished and what has the enviable possibility of achieving. Though President Trump's gratuitous comments about Canada becoming a 51st state are nonsense and he does not seriously mean them, they were somewhat invited by Justin Trudeau's [exaggerated statement](#) of what 25 percent tariffs would do Canada.

If this galvanizes Canadians to a greater sense of what this country has accomplished and what its potential is, then Trump has done us a favour. It is about time for some unselfconscious patriotism in this country. We have earned that.

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