

Celebrate Canada, but not its political leaders or its propensity for self-flagellation

by Conrad Black



In my expression of gratitude to COVID vaccinators last week, I did not mention that the federal government took an unconscionable risk in gambling on the effect of a 10-week gap between vaccinations, nor the disgraceful record Canada has in getting the population fully vaccinated, nor the intolerable delay in reopening the country. It is disappointing to see how quiescently Canadians have endured all this official ineptitude. As I have written here before, I think we grafted onto ourselves the hysteria about the COVID-19 virus that was promoted by the American national political media, not because it responded to medical facts, but in order to produce a climate of fear and economic depression that could be utilized

to defeat President Donald Trump. (It was the pandemic that won the election, not the completely inadequate candidates the Democrats nominated or their insane platform.) There is no justification for the West's blunderbuss-dictatorial deep-freeze shutdown to slow a disease that has a low mortality rate among young, healthy people. As mortifyingly inept as the federal and most of the other governments have been, the official opposition has been even less effective. If former prime ministers Brian Mulroney, John Diefenbaker or Stephen Harper (the only people who have won full-term elections against the Liberals in 90 years), had led the opposition (as they all successfully did), this government would have been sent to the showers by irresistible public demand long ago.

Canada generally imitates the United States in its fads and attitudes and as my colleague Jonathan Kay wrote here last weekend, the political struggle in the United States between the bipartisan establishment and Trump's populist-nationalist-capitalist movement has had powerful resonances in Canada. Our former chief distinguishing characteristic – a confectioned and supercilious hostility to the U.S. – has actually fallen away. As the most conspicuous element of American life is now an absurdly woke, self-inflicted anti-Americanism and the denunciation of almost everything as somehow racist, even though only a small minority of Americans believe any of it, the papier-mâché sword of anti-Americanism has fallen from the feeble hands of Canadian media and academic nationalists. But in our Dudley Do-Right scarlet-tunicked Canadian benignity, instead of a stentorian anti-American victory lap, we have reverted to the sincerest form of flattery and are trying to imitate and compete with this brief moment of American self-dislike. Canada Day is denounced by many and the founder of our country is reviled as something akin to a Nazi.

It is very disappointing. Even in the time of Abraham Lincoln, Lord Palmerston, William Ewart Gladstone, Benjamin Disraeli and Otto von Bismarck, John A. Macdonald was seen as an

outstanding statesman and was highly regarded by all those mentioned (except for Bismarck, who never knew him). Macdonald's political genius more than anything else shepherded the Canadian provinces and territories toward the world's only transcontinental, bicultural, parliamentary federation, which has endured practically unchanged for longer than the political institutions of any country in the world with a population as large as Canada's, except the United Kingdom and the United States. Macdonald's extraordinary diplomatic ability enabled him to out-negotiate both the British and the Americans at the Washington Conference of 1871 and establish that Canada was an independent country with its own national interest and foreign policy. And Macdonald was the real father of the Canadian Pacific Railroad, a much more complicated track to lay across the Canadian Shield than corresponding American railways, which was both an engineering and a financial marvel, as Canada had no real capital markets of its own. He used the half-built railway to transport forces to the West, which were necessary to suppress Louis Riel's Métis rebellion in 1885, and then lauded the indispensability of the railway (which was insolvent), in preventing the secession of most of what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta, thus securing another public refinancing to complete it. He used two concurrent crises to solve each other in a tour de force of statesmanship. He gave Natives the right to vote and was trying to help them and had Native allies such as Crowfoot and Poundmaker. The denigration of him now is scandalous and most Canadians disagree with it.

Because Canadian courts and legislatures essentially outlawed the practice of slavery early in the 19th century, and then the U.K. banned it outright in Britain and its colonies in 1833, Canada never had the original sin of slavery that the U.S. has, so we have had to devise our own narratives for self-torment. This is the only explanation I have found for our greatly exaggerated self-pillory over our treatment of Indigenous people. Canada's Indigenous policy has generally

failed and Indigenous people have been treated poorly throughout Canadian history, but never faced the kind of "genocide" Canada is now being accused of attempting. Macdonald and others believed they were doing the Natives a favour by trying to assimilate them to the life of European-Canadians, just as the British and Anglo-Canadians thought they were doing a favour by uniting Upper and Lower Canada in 1840, with the avowed purpose of assimilating the French-Canadians and relieving them of the terrible burden of speaking French. These missions were misconceived, but they were not based on hostility, much less on any bunk about "systemic racism."

The infamous residential schools had a more mixed record than it is now fashionable to state, but with our susceptibility to guilt, Canada has already committed itself to a preposterous regime of both material and jurisdictional reparations in response to the champions of Indigenous victimhood. Most Canadians know that our Indigenous policy must be radically reformed, but not by open-ended national self-flagellation and impoverishment. Very few Canadians are bigots. There is as little racial and sectarian antagonism here as anywhere in the world that has remotely as diverse a population as Canada; immigrants are welcomed with probably greater generosity of spirit than in any other country. We have a relatively good justice system and have never been a party to aggressive or imperialist impulses. We have engaged only in just wars, from which we sought and gained nothing except the advancement of freedom in the world, and fought with distinction and with almost entirely volunteer forces, though Canada itself was not threatened.

Apart from an uncompetitive economy and excessive political correctness, our brooding self-torment has left us with two dreadful stigmata: the present prime minister has falsely confessed that Canada's over-zealous but mistaken attempt to help First Nations people was cultural genocide; and the

enthusiasm of all of the federal parties to acquiesce to the Quebec government's move to abolish the use of the English language in federal government operations and federally chartered corporations. A national government that applauds stamping out its majority language in a jurisdiction that contains a quarter of the whole population has lost its right to govern. This is closer to cultural genocide than anything inflicted on the Natives, and also verges on national suicide in increments. Former prime minister Pierre Trudeau would inflict an unimaginable tongue-lashing on his son; so should the voters.

This is a great country, but you could not at the moment divine that from the quality of its political leadership, and the frightening fact is that in a democracy, people get the government they deserve. A happy and proud Canada Day to all.

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