

What Defines Canada's Unique Identity

By Conrad Black

The recent rather cavalier comments by Donald Trump that Canada should simply throw in the towel as an independent country because it doesn't really pay for its own defence and outgoing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau allegedly telling him that the imposition of 25 percent tariffs on exports to the United States would destroy our economy has been a primary topic of discussion.



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problems are to increase our defence budget, operate our public sector more efficiently, do a much better job of retaining and attracting investment capital in this country, maximize exports of our natural resources to the world, and liberate ourselves from the superstitious bunk that if we don't reduce fossil fuel use and exports we are contributing

to the death of the planet. Beyond that, we should explain to the U.S. government that it does not serve its best interests to inconvenience Canada, and that any retaliatory tariffs and other measures, including discouraging winter tourism to the United States, would be a significant inconvenience to them also—and what is the point of that?

The United States has a considerable need for Canadian uranium, potash, hydroelectricity, forest products, and a range of base metals. Of course, the United States could obtain these resources elsewhere, but at greater cost. Because the U.S. national interest would not be served by such action, one must assume that the returning American president is simply playing poker. *Le roi s'amuse*. It won't happen because it makes no sense.

It is scandalous that President-elect Trump likened our conduct to Mexico's and announced equivalent retaliation against both countries. Mexico imports components from China, incentivizes American companies to shut factories in the United States and open new ones just inside the Mexican border, fabricates manufactured goods from Chinese components with Mexican cheap labour and dumps them [back into the United States](#), exporting both manufacturers and unemployment into that country. Canada does almost none of that.

It is also outrageous that Mexico has encouraged the flow of millions of destitute people across the southern U.S. border and receives [remissions of over US\\$55 billion](#) a year from Mexican citizens illegally resident and working in the United States. Canada is a fair-trading country, and Canadians do not flee to America. Some Canadians depart to another country but practically all of them do so legally. For anyone to pretend that there's the slightest comparison in trading or immigration policies between Canada and Mexico is fatuous.

Canada has been mismanaged for some years, but remains a G7 country and one of the 10 or 12 most important countries in the world, and should not be glibly referred to as a candidate for annexation, as Alaska was when it was bought for a bagatelle [in 1867 from Russia](#). Trump is correct that Canada's defence freeloading has been a disgrace, and in this respect, both past and current governments deserve the blame.

To translate complaints about our border security and the

passage of undesirable people through Canada into the United States into a draconian response of higher tariffs, is a complete non sequitur. It is the responsibility of sovereign countries to protect their own borders, and Canada is not East Germany building a wall to keep people in this country; people are free to leave Canada whenever they wish. Trump's complaint is with the horrifying mismanagement of America's southern border, and this was among the greatest single contributors to Trump's election victory in November. Certainly, if there is any laxity in tolerating undesirables to use this country as a stepping stone to enter and disrupt the United States, we should mend our ways at once—but there was no need for Trump's histrionics to achieve that goal.

There is a case to be made, as Trump implicitly acknowledged, for closer economic arrangements between Canada and the United States. The [bilateral free trade agreement](#) (superseded by NAFTA) served the interests of both countries.

This raises the ancient and vexatious issue of Canadian identity. It was the principal contention of the history of Canada that I wrote some years ago that from Samuel de Champlain's [founding of Quebec in 1608](#) to the present, there has been a belief that it was both an opportunity and a deity to build a uniquely distinguished society in the northern half of this continent. Canada had to begin as a French enterprise or it would've been assimilated into the American colonies. It had to cease to be French at almost the same time the Americans ceased to be British, because only Britain could deter the Americans from taking over Canada. We had to conciliate the French prior to the American Revolution or they would have delivered Canada to the Americans. We could not have preserved Canada in the War of 1812 without the full cooperation of the French-Canadians and the large number of Americans that the governor of Upper Canada (Ontario), John Graves Simcoe, had enticed to this country with generous land grants.

We never had the option that the Americans had of achieving our independence by revolution, because if we had alienated the British, the Americans would have subsumed Canada into

their country. So John A. Macdonald and George-Étienne Cartier and others had to convince the British that if Canadians did not have a degree of political freedom and autonomy comparable to that of the Americans and the British, they would inevitably become American.

For all these reasons, Canada's identity historically has frequently been somewhat self-consciously described as, in effect, not being American. There is a more positive *raison d'être* than that. We do not have the tradition of revolutionary violence or the legacy of slavery of the United States. The right to bear arms has never been synonymous with the founding of the country and the assertion of our rights as free people. And there was never any commercial argument for slavery in Canada as there was in the United States; the people of African or Caribbean ancestry were more efficient at harvesting tropical crops like cotton, which did not grow in our climate.

The reason for the existence of Canada is not one that we have altogether achieved, but may legitimately strive for: to have a society with the positive aspects of the United States but in a more civil society and with much less violence, corruption, and racial friction. These are reasonable ambitions, but they have to be pursued at the same time as a quest for a standard of living fully competitive with that of the United States—an area where we have failed in the last decade. But we have been a successful country: Canada is the only transcontinental, bicultural, parliamentary Confederation in the history of the world, and our political institutions have been more durable than any other large country except the United Kingdom and the United States (and the British lost Ireland and America had a terrible civil war).

This is not something to be frivolously thrown away, and President Trump, who is authentically pro-Canadian and knows the country well, was not being serious when he suggested it, as most Canadians seem to realize.

First published in the [Epoch Times](#)