

## The Nicer Americans



*"Every Canadian has a complicated relationship with the United States, whereas Americans think of Canada as the place where weather comes from." (Margaret Atwood)*

*"Canada is not a melting pot. Canada is an association of people who have, and cherish, great differences but who work together because they can respect themselves and each other". (Vincent Massey)*

*"Culture is a fluid thing, and as history has shown, attempts to define an airtight cultural character are usually projects of delusion and denial." (Murtaza Hussain, Toronto)*

On my way North to spend the New Year's holiday with friends and colleagues in Canada, images from Michael Moore's 1995 American comedy film, **Canadian Bacon**, satirizing international relations along our shared borderland territories, came to mind. The plot revolves around an American president's need to boost his popularity by launching a cold war with our neighbors: **Operation Canadian Bacon: A Line in the Snow**. A newscaster appears early on with a map of the United States with maple syrup dripping down over Minnesota and Montana as evidence of the evil seeping across our border, along with dark speculation as to how their metric system is actually a conspiracy designed to undermine and destroy our way of life. The familiar Canadian moniker "Canucks" was conflated to imply something like "sinister commie".

My favorite scene is probably one where a bumbling American sheriff, on his way to Toronto, which he mistakenly believes to be the country's capital, is stopped by an overly polite policeman who noticed the graffiti on the sheriff's truck "Canucks are

dog meat". This, the policeman observes, is against the law since Canada is officially bi-lingual and therefore all graffiti and other slogans must be printed in both French and English. In reality, of course, there is no border war and Americans leaving Calgary will discover a fully operational USA customs service right there on Canadian soil. As far as I am aware, we have no such arrangements with Mexico.

While there is no cold war up there it was definitely a cold winter with average daily temperatures far below zero. For Americans visiting Canada for the first time, it can be a somewhat confusing place. While their citizens both look and sound much like we do, there are important differences; including differences about those differences. While it seems that Americans will tell all the ways in which we are similar to our northern cousins on the other side of the 49th parallel, they will likely tell all of the ways that they are different. Canada is a monarchy and citizens have the option to use their government services in either English or French and; they have far fewer enemies than our ever expanding, militaristic, global empire. We also tend to differ along certain political topics, such as gun control, abortion, death penalty, religion and universal health care.

Yet, for me as a visitor to the Great White North, I was soon aware of how very different we are in our respective attitudes toward the subject of immigration. This is an ongoing, highly flammable topic here in Arizona, given that we are a southwestern border state; as well as a deeply divisive issue throughout our nationwide mainstream and alternative media outlets. Overall, the tendency here seems to be of an increasing xenophobia along with calls for draconian measures, such as rounding up illegals, massive deportations, a mandatory Muslim registry and confinement camps for suspicious and unwanted "others". Some Americans fear that our political dissidents, and others critical of the current regime will be labeled as "domestic terrorists" and possibly faced with charges of treason. Small wonder then, that the Canadian, Citizen and Immigration web-site, received a sudden influx of visitors during our 2016 election night, causing their overwhelmed system to temporarily crash.

In contrast to our harsh stances, with talk of building walls and defending borders, the mood in Canada is much less fear based, with a greater sense of interpersonal trust and an almost cheerful commitment to tolerance and inclusion. In contrast to

the rising, angry anti-immigration political parties in the US and Europe, Canada may be one of the last immigrant nations left standing. The government and a majority of citizens firmly believe in the value of immigration. In the city of Toronto, for example, now among the most diverse cities on the planet, over half of its residents were born outside of the country, and Calgary, Vancouver, Montreal and Ottawa are not far behind.

Among the practical reasons for Canada keeping the doors open, is low fertility and an aging population; and as their statistics confirm, diversity aids prosperity. There is an ongoing experiment in filling a continent-wide, mostly empty landmass, with the diversity of the world's cultures, who must learn to survive and thrive amid multiple identities and allegiances. (Charles Foran, <https://www.theguardian.com/us>, January 4, 2017).

While one could say that this experiment is incomplete, Canada still offers a haven of opportunity for many, and at this time all that is asked of newcomers is social amiability, respect for their laws and institutions and contribution, maintenance and improvements in public life. In some provinces Muslim women were welcomed with the message: "We don't care what is on your head, we care what's in it". Given that Canadians believe that immigration creates jobs rather than stealing them, instances of immigrant doctors and engineers driving taxis are the exception rather than the rule, and Chinese surgeons and Syrian architects are not waiting tables. Even those who don't welcome immigration mostly accept it as a fact of life.

No human society is perfect, and racism remains as a significant thread throughout Canada's history, and as has been the case with all white colonial settlers, the indigenous peoples suffered greatly at the hands of the newcomers. Not until the nineteen seventies, were policies formalized to protect the rights of indigenous peoples. While racism has not completely disappeared, progress was initiated during the nineteen-sixties, as Canada began accepting increasing numbers of non-white immigrants and many previous policies of racial discrimination were rescinded; and since the nineteen-seventies the majority of immigrants are of non-European ancestry.

For now, at least, our northern neighbor's strong capacity for mutual accommodation bodes well and offers a sane and sustainable model for social-cultural strength and

stability, in our increasingly stressed and overcrowded world. Canada's ability to collaborate with others, with flexibility in the face of complex situations, will likely serve them well as climate changes indicate that they will soon be surrounded by three oceans.