

The Canada experiment: is this the world's first 'postnational' country?

When Justin Trudeau said 'there is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada', he was articulating a uniquely Canadian philosophy that some find bewildering, even reckless - but could represent a radical new model of nationhood



'Marshall McLuhan saw in Canada the raw materials for a dynamic new conception of nationhood.' Illustration: Jacqui Oakley

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As 2017 begins, Canada may be the last immigrant nation left standing. Our government believes in the value of immigration, as does the majority of the population. We took in an estimated 300,000 newcomers in 2016, including 48,000 refugees, and we want them to become citizens; around 85% of permanent residents eventually do. Recently there have been concerns about bringing in single Arab men, but otherwise Canada welcomes people from all faiths and corners. The greater Toronto area is now the most diverse city on the planet, with half its residents born outside the country; Vancouver, Calgary, Ottawa and Montreal aren't far behind. Annual immigration accounts for roughly 1% of the country's current population of 36 million.

Canada has been over-praised lately for, in effect, going about our business as usual. In 2016 such luminaries as US President Barack Obama and Bono, no less, declared “the world needs more Canada”. In October, the Economist blared “Liberty Moves North: Canada’s Example to the World” on its cover, illustrated by the Statue of Liberty haloed in a maple leaf and wielding a hockey stick. Infamously, on the night of the US election Canada’s official immigration website crashed, apparently due to the volume of traffic.

Of course, 2016 was also the year - really the second running - when many western countries turned angrily against immigration, blaming it for a variety of ills in what journalist Doug Saunders calls the “global reflex appeal to fear”. Alongside the rise of nativism has emerged a new nationalism that can scarcely be bothered to deny its roots in racial identities and exclusionary narratives.

Compared to such hard stances, Canada’s almost cheerful commitment to inclusion might at first appear almost naive. It isn’t. There are practical reasons for keeping the doors open. Starting in the 1990s, low fertility and an aging population began slowing Canada’s natural growth rate. Ten years ago, two-thirds of population increase was courtesy of immigration. By 2030, it is projected to be 100%.

The economic benefits are also self-evident, especially if full citizenship is the agreed goal. All that “settlers” - ie, Canadians who are not indigenous to the land - need do is look in the mirror to recognize the generally happy ending of an immigrant saga. Our government repeats it, our statistics confirm it, our own eyes and ears register it: diversity fuels, not undermines, prosperity.

But as well as practical considerations for remaining an immigrant country, Canadians, by and large, are also philosophically predisposed to an openness that others find bewildering, even reckless. The prime minister, Justin Trudeau, articulated this when he told the New York Times Magazine that Canada could be the “first postnational state”. He added: “There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada.”

The remark, made in October 2015, failed to cause a ripple - but when I mentioned it to Michael Bach, Germany’s minister for European affairs, who was touring Canada to learn more about integration, he was astounded. No European politician could say such a thing, he said. The thought was too radical.

For a European, of course, the nation-state model remains sacrosanct, never mind how ill-suited it may be to an era of dissolving borders and widespread exodus. The modern state - loosely defined by a more or less coherent racial and religious group, ruled by internal laws and guarded by a national army - took shape in Europe. Telling an Italian or French citizen they lack a “core identity” may not be the best vote-winning strategy.

To Canadians, in contrast, the remark was unexceptional. After all, one of the country’s greatest authors, Mavis Gallant, once defined a Canadian as “someone with a logical reason to think he may be one” - not exactly a ringing assertion of a national character type. Trudeau could, in fact, have been voicing a chronic anxiety among Canadians: the absence of a shared identity.

But he wasn’t. He was outlining, however obliquely, a governing principle about Canada in the 21st century. We don’t talk about ourselves in this manner often, and don’t yet have the vocabulary to make our case well enough. Even so, the principle feels right. Odd as it may seem, Canada may finally be owning our postnationalism.

There's more than one story in all this. First and foremost, postnationalism is a frame to understand our ongoing experiment in filling a vast yet unified geographic space with the diversity of the world. It is also a half-century old intellectual project, born of the country's awakening from colonial slumber. But postnationalism has also been in intermittent practise for centuries, since long before the nation-state of Canada was formalised in 1867. In some sense, we have always been thinking differently about this continent-wide landmass, using ideas borrowed from Indigenous societies. From the moment Europeans began arriving in North America they were made welcome by the locals, taught how to survive and thrive amid multiple identities and allegiances.

That welcome was often betrayed, in particular during the late 19th and 20th centuries, when settler Canada did profound harm to Indigenous people. But, if the imbalance remains, so too does the influence: the model of another way of belonging.



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Can any nation truly behave “postnationally” - ie without falling back on the established mechanisms of state governance and control? The simple answer is no.

Canada has borders, where guards check passports, and an army. It asserts the occasional modest territorial claim. Trudeau is more aware than most of these mechanisms: he oversees them.

It can also be argued that Canada enjoys the luxury of thinking outside the nation-state box courtesy of its behemoth neighbour to the south. The state needn't defend its borders too forcefully or make that army too large, and Canada's economic prosperity may be as straightforward as continuing to do 75% of its trade with the US. Being liberated, the thinking goes, from the economic and military stresses that most other countries face gives Canada the breathing room, and the confidence, to experiment with more radical approaches to society. Lucky us.

Nor is there uniform agreement within Canada about being post-anything. When the novelist Yann Martel casually described his homeland as “the greatest hotel on earth,” he meant it as a compliment - but some read it as an endorsement of newcomers deciding to view Canada as a convenient waystation: a security, business or real-estate opportunity, with no lasting responsibilities attached.

Likewise, plenty of Canadians believe we possess a set of normative values, and want newcomers to prove they abide by them. Kellie Leitch, who is running for the leadership of the Conservative party, suggested last autumn that we screen potential immigrants for “anti-Canadian values.” A minister in the previous Conservative government, Chris Alexander, pledged in 2015 to set up a tip-line for citizens to report “barbaric cultural practises”. And in the last election, the outgoing prime minister, Stephen Harper, tried in vain to hamstring Trudeau’s popularity by confecting a debate about the hijab.

To add to the mix, the French-speaking province of Quebec already constitutes one distinctive nation, as do the 50-plus First Nations spread across the country. All have their own perspectives and priorities, and may or may not be interested in a postnational frame. (That said, Trudeau is a bilingual Montrealer, and Quebec a vibrantly diverse society.)

In short, the nation-state of Canada, while wrapped in less bunting than other global versions, is still recognisable. But postnational thought is less about hand-holding in circles and shredding passports. It’s about the use of a different lens to examine the challenges and precepts of an entire politics, economy and society.

Though sovereign since 1867, Canada lingered in the shadow of the British empire for nearly a century. Not until the 1960s did we fly our own flag and sing our own anthem, and not until 1982 did Trudeau’s father, Pierre, patriate the constitution from the UK, adding a charter of rights. He also introduced multiculturalism as official national policy. The challenge, then, might have seemed to define a national identity to match.

This was never going to be easy, given our colonial hangover and American cultural influence. Marshall McLuhan, one of the last century’s most seismic thinkers, felt we shouldn’t bother. “Canada is the only country in the world that knows how to live without an identity,” he said in 1963.

According to poet and scholar BW Powe, McLuhan saw in Canada the raw materials for a dynamic new conception of nationhood, one unshackled from the state’s “demarcated borderlines and walls, its connection to blood and soul,” its obsession with “cohesion based on a melting pot, on nativist fervor, the idea of the promised land”. Instead, the weakness of the established Canadian identity encouraged a plurality of them - not to mention a healthy flexibility and receptivity to change. Once Canada moved away from privileging denizens of the former empire to practising multiculturalism, it could become a place where “many faiths and histories and visions” would co-exist.

That’s exactly what happened. If McLuhan didn’t see how Chinese, Japanese, Ukrainian and later Italian, Greek and Eastern European arrivals underpinned the growth of Canada in that sleepy first century, he surely registered before his death in 1980 the positive impact of successive waves of South Asians, Vietnamese and Caribbean immigrants. The last several decades have been marked by an increasingly deep diversity, particularly featuring mainland Chinese, Indians and Filipinos.

Others have expanded on McLuhan’s insight. The writer and essayist John Ralston Saul (co-founder of the charity for which I work) calls Canada a “revolutionary reversal of the standard nation-state myth”, and ascribes much of our radical capacity - not a term you often hear applied to Canadians - to our application of the Indigenous concept of welcome. “Space for multiple

identities and multiple loyalties,” he says of these philosophies, the roots of which go deep in North American soil, “for an idea of belonging which is comfortable with contradictions.”

How unique is any of this? Ralston Saul argues that Canada’s experiment is “perpetually incomplete”. In other countries, a sovereignty movement like Quebec’s might have led to bloodshed. Instead, aside from a brief period of violent separatist agitation culminating in kidnappings and a murder in 1970, Canada and Quebec have been in constant compromise mode, arguing at the ballot box and finding ways to accommodate. Canada’s incomplete identity is, in this sense, a positive, a spur to move forward without spilling blood, to keep thinking and evolving – perhaps, in the end, simply to respond to newness without fear.

We’re still working on the language. The same Canadian who didn’t appreciate being told he has no identity might rankle at being called a citizen of an “incomplete” nation. The American and European citizen, too, may find all this chatter about inclusion and welcome ethereal, if not from another planet given the events of 2016, in which the US elected an authoritarian whose main policy plank was building a wall, Britain voted to leave the EU in large part to control immigration, and rightwing political parties gleefully hostile to diversity may soon form national governments, including in France.

None of this raw populism is going away in 2017, especially as it gets further irritated by the admittedly formidable global challenge of how to deal with unprecedented numbers of people crossing national borders, with or without visas. But denial, standing your nativist ground, doing little or nothing to evolve your society in response to both a crisis and, less obviously, an opportunity: these are reactions, not actions, and certain to make matters worse.

If the pundits are right that the world needs more Canada, it is only because Canada has had the history, philosophy and possibly the physical space to do some of that necessary thinking about how to build societies differently. Call it postnationalism, or just a new model of belonging: Canada may yet be of help in what is guaranteed to be the difficult year to come.

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