

# Purpose and Identity: Challenges Facing Canada in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Notes for an address by  
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## *Introduction*

This is my third or fourth presentation to the Summer Seminar. One always hopes to say something useful to participants on these occasions, but I must tell you that each has also been of great benefit to me, in at least two respects:

- it has offered me an opportunity to collect my thoughts on issues that matter to me and, I hope, to Canadians;
- and it has given me feedback on those ideas from an audience of experts whose views are not coloured by conventional wisdom in Ottawa. This has been immensely valuable.

So, thank you for inviting me here today.

In previous talks I spoke about two major challenges facing Canada and Canadians:

- The first revolved around the competitive challenges of our all-pervasive relationship with the United States and the need to make critical investments in infrastructure, education and culture in the face of inevitable economic integration with the U.S.
- On that occasion I said that “*the real challenge facing Canadians over the next several decades is that of preserving a distinctive social and cultural space in the northern half of the continent, in the face of inevitable economic integration with the United States.*”
- Last summer, my talk focused on issues of *culture and identity* – issues that I am sure are of interest to those of you who work on Canadian literature and Canadian history, on sociology and on politics. I was perhaps more optimistic about what we have achieved in cultural terms, and about what we have to offer the world, than are many of my colleagues here in Ottawa, or indeed some of you who study Canada.

So you might say that, in staking out my ground on these matters, I have said two fairly simple things:

- First, it is my view that living next door to the U.S. challenges Canadians to define and articulate who we are and what we stand for.
- Second, I am saying that, to this point at least, we have actually done quite well in projecting a Canadian identity to the world in literature and music, especially popular music, though not so well in television and film.

Today, I want to further explore these issues and these lines of argument. I will say some things that you may not agree with, but that I hope will stimulate your thinking during your stay here in Ottawa. And of course, I welcome your comments and questions.

My thesis today – and remember I am nationalist and someone who is proud of the many achievements of this country in every field of human endeavour – is the following:

*I am concerned that, despite the undoubted successes of our economy and our culture over the past fifty years, we face challenges of national identity and national purpose that pose a grave risk to this country.*

*My second, subordinate thesis is that to do all this requires sustained action by the federal government. Indeed, I would say that what the government does in addressing these inter-related challenges underpins almost everything else it does in the economy, in social policy and programs, and internationally.*

To put it another way, I have come to the conclusion that unless we Canadians can agree on

- a) who we are, and
- b) why we're here, together, as a community,

we will not be able to resist the economic and cultural pull of the U.S. that I have spoken about in this and other forums over the past several years.

I am concerned that, if we are not successful in addressing these challenges of identity and purpose, what is done by our national government will become less and less relevant to Canadians, and to our allies and partners.

I am concerned that we risk evolving, almost imperceptibly, from being a *country* to being merely a *jurisdiction* – a geographic space where people live and work, but are less and less able to play a significant role in the world, and increasingly less able to deal with the pressing issues that are emerging in our society.

I think we are in danger of losing our way, of failing to articulate and agree upon what it is to be Canadian, what are the rights and obligations of our citizenship, and what are the common purposes that make it worth our while to move into the future together.

Before I begin to explore these two questions of identity and of purpose some preliminary observations:

- **First, identity is not the same thing as citizenship.** Citizenship can be just an administrative device, a passport you carry; *who* you are is determined by such things as culture, language, race, religion and ethnicity. Identity is about who you identify with – identity in this sense is the answer to the question “who is us”?
- **Second, national purpose is not the same thing as consensus on a particular political agenda.** Rather, ‘purpose’ in the sense in which I am using the term refers to the sense of common interest and common destiny among the members of a group. Purpose is what makes politics possible.
- **Third, questions of national purpose and national identity are connected, but neither is determined by the other.** For example, I would say that Americans have a broadly shared idea of their national purpose, but their sense of collective identity has become somewhat clouded in recent years.
- By the same token, one can be clear, as the Australians are, on national identity, while still raising questions about national purpose – i.e., about how they fit into their region, and about their relationship with the rest of the First World.

## *Why are we in this situation?*

The origins of our present dilemma are clear:

- (1) We Canadians want the economic and security benefits of living next door to the U.S., without having to pay the price required to maintain social and cultural independence. To a much greater extent than we are prepared to admit, we have been 'free riders' on their train. Regrettably, and perhaps not surprisingly, this comfortable circumstance has fostered bad habits, the consequences of which are only now becoming apparent.
- (2) We are such a large and diverse country that it is almost impossible for us to agree on what are the major problems and opportunities:
  - for Quebec, the absolutely fundamental issue is its place in a renewed federation;
  - for Ontario, the issue is cross-border economic integration and fiscal fairness in a federation in which there now only two "have" provinces;
  - for BC and Alberta, the problem is the perceived central Canadian bias in every aspect of the federation;
  - for Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the issue is the very future of those two provinces;
  - for Atlantic Canada the big issue is maintaining federal transfers while getting the benefits of the off-shore and other resource wealth that is now coming on stream;
  - for Aboriginal people, the issue is redress for injustice.
- (3) Every federal government is obliged to spend much of its time and money placating those regional and other interests.
- (4) No provincial government sees Canada's relationship with the U.S. as something to be addressed on a comprehensive, national basis.
- (5) No province is looking for a pan-Canadian solution – other than simply more money from the federal government – in any area that is theirs under the Constitution. (At least not a solution that would interfere with their authority to tax, regulate or administer.)
- (6) The federal government seem incapable of staying out of provincial areas of responsibility, yet unable to play a useful and constitutionally-appropriate role in vital areas such as urban affairs and education.
- (7) There is a large and growing gap between the values and interests of rural dwellers and those of urbanites. The former represent the 'old' Canada, shaped by geography and history, and tied in human terms to both.

By contrast, people in the cities are more North American in values and outlook; they are a more diverse mix, unconnected to the Canada of English and French settlement, the fur trade, the two World Wars and all the historical and cultural icons with which we are so familiar.

- (8) Perhaps most importantly, the forces of change in this country – economic, international, demographic – are all tending toward fragmentation, not unity. Respect for diversity is a hallmark of the new Canada; but it must be balanced by reinforcement of the values that are common to all Canadians.

### *So who are we?*

Well, we're not who we used to be, that's for sure. As you know, in less than forty years we have gone from the old Canada, largely though not entirely English and French, to the new multicultural and remarkably harmonious Canada that is seen as a source of inspiration to the rest of the world.

The new Canada is one of the most urbanized societies in the world. And our cities, especially Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, are the destination for more than 90% of the 250,000 immigrants who come to this country every year.

The new Canada is drawn from all parts of the world. It is diverse in both ethnic and religious terms.

If this new Canada is to succeed, socially and economically, then the newcomers must see a place for themselves in it. Our institutions – government, Parliament, schools – must reflect their faces; our politicians must reflect their views. If they do not, we are all in trouble.

In one sense, none of this is new. First Nations aside, we are all immigrants or descendents of immigrants. Immigration is not a problem, it is an important part of the solution for a country that needs people.

But the best we can expect of newcomers is that they come prepared to start afresh, to contribute to a society in which they have chosen to live; to accept its values while enriching its existing social and cultural fabric.

What is that fabric? It is something that is the responsibility of those of us who are here already to define and to articulate.

- It is a *history* that belongs to all of us, new or old.
- It is an acceptance of certain societal *premises*, like the fact that we have two official languages, or that Canada's Aboriginal people have certain inherent rights, or that in this country, the richer provinces are constitutionally obliged to help out the poorer ones.
- It is, or it ought to be, a willingness to make individual sacrifices for the *common good*.

Do Canadians share those premises today? Do they know the history? Do they share the premises? I am concerned that fewer do today than in the past, and fewer still will in the future.

There are large reasons that underpin this loss of collective identity:

- the world-wide phenomenon of urbanization
- the information revolution, that creates new communities across local and even national lines
- the pervasive impact of American culture, in all its many forms
- North American economic integration
- Canada's declining economic position vis a vis the U.S. , which among other things draws the most ambitious and talented Canadians south of the border
- demographic and geographic changes that divorce people from their personal and cultural roots.

Dealing with the challenge of national identity is a core responsibility of the federal government.

- No province – other than Quebec, which asserts its own national identity – is prepared to invest very much in “Canadianism”.
- No province other than New Brunswick cares about official bilingualism.
- No province is prepared to underwrite the costs of operating a bilingual country.

Canadian identity is very much the legitimate business of the federal government. Defining and affirming that identity is a long-term task. It requires:

- political leadership
- popular understanding and support
- a willingness by government and by individuals to invest in social and cultural infrastructure as well as in the physical
- a continuing commitment to the promotion of Canadian culture at home and abroad
- and, in constitutionally appropriate ways, a willingness to invest in promoting awareness among young Canadians of the history and culture of the country (i.e., education).

It also means being ready to engage in addressing the concerns of urban Canadians, because they constitute by far the majority of our citizens, and because many of their problems require national solutions.

### *And what is our collective purpose?*

This is a second vital responsibility of the national government – to spell out what we stand for, and to recognize that it may cost money to stand up for what we believe in.

Canadians like to think that theirs is a society defined at least in part by values:

- a commitment to the common good that is expressed in our national system of health care

- a commitment to individual opportunity and development that is expressed in our system of higher education
- a commitment to technological progress (R&D) as a tool for social benefit
- a commitment to fairness and justice in the world, that is expressed in our support for the UN and for UN-mandated activities such as peacekeeping.

If these really are our values, then we should be prepared to stand up for them, to put our money where our heart is.

Sadly, we are under-investing in all these areas, both domestic and international. We are simply no where near as good as we think we are. And we are failing to take the tough decisions required to express our national values in these vital areas.

- we have yet to address the challenges of maintaining an affordable system of public health care (and the solution is not more money)
- we have yet to awake to the competitive challenge of higher education in North America
- we have badly neglected our military, our aid program and even our foreign ministry.

### *What do we need to do to get there?*

You are doubtless aware that our governing party, the Liberal Party, is now engaged in a struggle to see which person will lead the government and the country – not just for the remainder of the current electoral mandate but, it appears, for as far into the future as one can see.

The public debate is on. We expect a Throne Speech, and perhaps even a Budget this fall. You have come to Canada at a time of national direction setting.

Let us hope that as the leaders of the Liberal Party set out their agendas, they address the kinds of issues that I have talked about today – issues that are among the core responsibilities of the national government; issues that underpin everything else the government does in its policies and programs; issues that must be addressed if Canada is to continue to be a worthy subject of study by persons such as yourselves.

Thank you.