Canadian Culture and Canadian Identity

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(Note: This essay is drawn from a talk presented in August 2001 to the University of Ottawa Summer Seminar on Canadian Studies. The audience consisted of professors of Canadian studies and related disciplines who had come to Ottawa from Europe, Asia, the U.S. and the Indian sub-continent.)

Introduction

The question I wish to explore in this essay is that of the relationship between culture and the citizen's sense of identity[1]. Or, to put it another way, I am interested in the importance of a distinctive culture to the expression and preservation of a distinctive national identity. I want to make a point about why culture matters to Canada in some rather special ways, and what this means for public policy. My remarks apply in large part to English-speaking culture in Canada, though in some particular ways they also apply to culture produced in the French language in this country[2].

The relationship between culture and identity is not a trivial matter in the modern world. In the information age, American popular culture is ubiquitous, and it has begun to affect (some would say submerge) national and local cultures throughout the globe. For Canadians, who share a continent and one of their two official languages with the United States, the issue of culture and identity has been at times almost a national obsession[3]. Canadians have debated and they have legislated to protect their culture and their cultural institutions; they have used public funds to subsidize artists and artistic endeavours in every domain of cultural activity. To a considerable extent, as we shall see below, these efforts have succeeded—despite the fact Canada's increasing economic integration with the U.S. has intensified the pressures on a distinctive Canadian culture and identity.

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[1] I am using the term 'identity' in the sense of membership in a group that is generally recognized as a group, both by members and by non-members. That is, I am referring to identity in the collective rather than the individual sense.

[2] As well as the Canadian culture that I am going to talk about, there is also a Quebec culture, and distinctive cultures in Newfoundland and Cape Breton. There are not similarly distinct cultures in the other provinces, though the Acadian *people* do have a distinctive culture.

[3] Quite by contrast with their American neighbours, for whom neither issue has ever been terribly important.

Identity and Citizenship

It is widely agreed that identity is not simply a function of citizenship. Who you are, who you *feel* you are, is not necessarily reflected in the passport you carry. Like the people of Catalonia or Brittany, French-speaking Quebecers know this; so do Newfoundlanders and Acadians. Most Canadians recognize it too—identity is about *who* you are and *what* you are; it is about how you see yourself and the group with which you identify yourself by virtue of language, culture, kinship or even sexual orientation.

Identity in this collective sense is something that is partly self-determined and partly a matter of whether the other members of the group acknowledge you as one of them. One can describe and analyse the criteria that would justify an attribution of a particular group identity to an individual. One can also debate them: what is it to be a 'real Quebecer'? What is it to be Aboriginal? What is it to be a westerner? These questions are asked in Canada, and not always answered by everyone in the same way.

Identity in this collective sense may have legal consequences and may carry with it certain rights. For example, Canadian courts are beginning to take the view that if you identify yourself as a Métis,[4] and if your self-identification is acknowledged by the Métis National Council according to its criteria for 'membership' in the group commonly known as Métis, then you have certain entitlements to hunt and fish that are not enjoyed by non-Métis Canadians. Similarly, if you 'self-identify' as a visible minority in the Canadian Public Service, you will enjoy access to programs for employment and professional development that are not open to employees who are not visible minorities.

By contrast, the concept of citizenship describes membership in a class that is defined entirely in legal terms: you are a citizen of a country if the government of the country accepts you as a citizen. In every case, that acceptance depends on satisfying much stricter criteria of birth, residence, or kinship than are required for the mere assertion or recognition of group identity. Those criteria for citizenship are invariably expressed in law and regulations. Citizenship confers rights on individuals and it entails, in most cases, certain obligations. Citizenship can be associated with a particular national culture but the connection is not necessary. That is, you can be a citizen even if your sense of personal or cultural identity lies elsewhere.

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[4] That is, a person of mixed aboriginal and non-aboriginal descent

Citizenship is about the individual's relationship to the state rather than to the group. Citizenship is something over which the individual may have no control, in the sense that a state may assert and enforce the obligations of citizenship over an individual[5] irrespective of the wishes of that person.

Culture and Identity

Does this mean the state has no role to play in identity (in the sense we are using the term)? In an obvious sense, the answer must no. After all, for many people their sense of collective identity is closely connected with their citizenship. This is most obviously the case in the United States and in France, two countries where the citizen's sense of group identity is primarily with his or her fellow citizens. Yet in both these obvious cases, there are exceptions, whether racial (African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans in the U.S., north Africans in France), religious (Muslims in France) or geographic (Bretons in France, Southerners in the U.S.). Governments cannot create or determine the individual's sense of collective identity, but they can do a lot to encourage and sustain it through what they do in relation to national culture. This has been the Canadian experience, and it is that experience, particularly in relation to a country with a dominant culture, that has prompted Canadian governments to play a larger role in the encouragement of a distinctive national culture in support of a distinctive national identity.

Canadian Culture

There is today in Canada a dynamic, creative culture in which Canadians can take pride. It is, I would argue, a distinctive culture, in spite of its obvious connection to the cultures of the U.S. and other countries where Canadians have their ancestral or artistic roots.

My first proposition is that Canadian culture is flourishing—despite the fact that Canadians live next door to the United States, a cultural as well as an economic superpower whose largest export is cultural products. Moreover, Canadian culture is flourishing notwithstanding that many foreigners cannot easily distinguish Canadian cultural products from those of our neighbour to the south. It is flourishing in two languages[6] and in a hundred forms of expression that draw upon the diverse roots of Canada's population.

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[5] e.g., Military service.

There was a time—it was only 30 years ago—when it was said that Canadians may read and write poetry, but they were unable to establish a place for themselves in prose. Then came writers like Alice Munroe and Mavis Gallant. It was then said that Canadians could write short stories, but, unlike Britain or the U.S., Canada had no novelists worthy of international recognition.

Then came Margaret Atwood, and then Michael Ondaatje and Rohinton Mistry, and now Alistair MacLeod and others whose names deserve mention. Today Canadian novelists occupy a place on the world stage that is far out of proportion to Canada's population or political or economic influence in the world.

Was it a surprise when Margaret Atwood won the Booker prize in 2000? No. The debate was over *whether she had won it for her best book*.

Canada's culture—in books and music and art and almost every other form of creative expression—it is thriving in the information age. It is thriving despite the fact that Canada is becoming ever more economically integrated with the United States.

Why Government Matters

Culture is also something that Canadians have long seen as a proper subject for government to worry about. Canadians have expected government to care about it because they do not enjoy the same tradition of private patronage of the arts, or more recently, of world-scale industrial excellence (in film and music) that has characterized contemporary culture in sister democracies. Canada has have a relatively small population, and no significant history of private wealth that has seen fit to endow artists and the arts.

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[6] The issue of protecting and promoting French-speaking culture in Canada is one that both the federal government and the government of Quebec have taken very seriously over many years, for obvious reasons. Indeed, that issue–-the role of government in the protection of culture—constitutes one of the key planks in the political platform of the separatists in Quebec. And as is well known, the question of whether French-speaking culture in English-speaking North America is better protected by a sovereign Quebec or within a larger Canada committed to the protection of the French language and culture is one of the great questions in the enduring political debate in Canada.

So governments, and especially the federal government, have always seen a role for themselves:

- in direct support to artists and artistic endeavours (via the Canada Council and other federally-funded granting programs such as book publishing).
- in the creation of national cultural institutions like the CBC, the National Arts Centre, and the Canada Council.
- in law and regulation (e.g., the Canadian content rules on radio, the cultural property export review law, the laws on ownership of newspapers and TV/radio).

The theory was, if government didn't act, nothing would happen. And to a large extent, that was true. It was obviously government action that led to the creation of the CBC in the 1930s. This was a positive step, yet thirty years later, before government acted on the issue of Canadian content in popular music[7] there was almost no Canadian popular music on the radio. Today Canada's popular music industry is flourishing. Consider, for example, what an extraordinary achievement it was when, just a couple of years ago, the world's top-selling female vocalists in every category of popular music were Canadian:

- Celine Dion (Diva)
- Alanis Morissette (Pop)
- Shania Twain (Country)

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[7] In 1972 the CRTC introduced Radio Regulations which stipulated that commercial radio stations had to ensure that at least 30% of their broadcasted popular music selections were Canadian. The primary objective of these regulations was to encourage increased exposure of Canadian musical performers, lyricists and composers to Canadian audiences and to strengthen the Canadian music industry. These regulations had a direct impact on the availability of Canadian musical selections. Before that time, the Canadian music industry had not reached the level of maturity that is seen today. The CRTC's Commercial Radio Policy, revised in 1998 (Public Notice CRTC 1998-41), increased the Canadian content to at least 35%.('…at least 35% of popular music selections broadcast between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, must be Canadian selections")

- Sarah McLaughlin (New Age)
- Diana Krall (Jazz)

In a world in which American popular culture is seen to be overpowering virtually every other national culture, this is an extraordinary achievement. It means far more than most non-Canadians can imagine. Most importantly, it means that when young Canadians turn on the radio, or watch a video on television, they see themselves.

More prosaically, it also means there is a healthy recording industry in Toronto, and in Halifax and Montreal and Vancouver. It means that as a society Canadians are not just consumers of foreign culture, they are creators of cultural products that are finding a worldwide market. To a considerable extent, this achievement is a consequence of government policy. Government stepped into the marketplace of ideas and regulated a place for Canadians—and it worked!

Interestingly, the same thing has not happened to the same extent in television, where, through the CRTC, government acted in a similar fashion as it had in the music business. But regulation of Canadian content in television has not been a failure, either. Note, for example, that because of the requirement to create Canadian content for TV, a substantial film and TV industry has grown up here, especially in Toronto and Vancouver, both to create products for Canada and for export abroad, and also (significantly) to serve the immense U.S. market.

It must be acknowledged that, in the latter respect, Canada’s film and television industry is largely a branch plant of the vastly larger American television and film industry. But one must be patient. Just as in sound recording, the Canadian television and film industry has grown from nothing to something quite substantial (Canada is the world’s third or fourth largest exported of television products) in less than thirty years. It would be foolish to bet against the eventual emergence of a distinctive national cinema in Canada, as has occurred, for example, in Australia.

Why Culture Matters

Why do culture and cultural industries matter to Canada? They matter because the preservation of a distinctive, creative, successful Canadian culture is the key to the preservation of a distinct Canadian identity in an economically-integrated North America.

As is well known, Canada is becoming ever-more integrated into a single, U.S.-dominated North American economy:

- over 80% of Canada's exports go the U.S.;
- two-thirds of Canada's foreign investment comes from the U.S.;
- Canada and the U.S. share what is essentially a common labour market for high-end talent;
- politicians and editorialists in Canada are debating whether NAFTA ought to lead to some closer form of economic union, ranging from a customs union to a common currency.

Canada's economic future is clear and it is unavoidable. Canada is part of the American economic space. What is open for debate, and where governments can play a role, is *whether it will be possible to preserve a Canada that is politically and culturally distinct within, that economic space*.

This is where public policy gets interesting. For many years, Canadian governments sought, through law, regulation and direct intervention (subsidies, grants, etc) to carve out a distinctive *economic* space, while devoting comparatively less attention, and much less money, to the more nebulous challenge of investing in identity. *My second proposition is that the Government of Canada should do precisely the reverse.* That is:

- it should invest in culture and cultural institutions;
- it should consider carefully how to use regulation to ensure access by Canadians to Canadian cultural products such as film and video; and
- it should made appropriate changes to the tax system to encourage private giving, and investing in culture and cultural institutions.

The federal government must do what only a national government can do—it must invest in national (and local) cultural infrastructure because the cities and provinces either do not have the money or simply won't spend it. And it must do this in support of a distinctive Canadian identity within a larger North America dominated by the U.S.

In making these investments, what the government of Canada should not do is create a "state" culture. In spending money on artists and on particular artistic projects, government should not act directly but rather through arm's length bodies that are not part of government. The so-called 'Canada mark'—the half-flag that is beginning to be seen on everything from stationary to public buildings—should never appear on an artist's work. Nor, in particular, should it appear on the CBC[8].

Perhaps most importantly, in an age where cultural expression is the most significant expression of national identity, and in which cultural products are becoming ever more important elements of our national output, government must help Canadians to understand why public spending in this area is as important to our national interest as public spending in critical areas of social infrastructure such as health care.

Conclusion

In a hundred years, the world has gone from a time in which culture expression was largely local, to one in which that same expression must be national or international in its reach if it is to survive. Culture, whether we think in terms of the visual arts or literature or music, may have its roots in the community but today it finds its *audience* outside that community—via television, sound recording, film, video and the printed word. If Canadians writers or singers or filmmakers are to survive as creators, they must sell into a market larger than Canada. The same holds true for virtually every other form of creative expression in Canada and indeed everywhere in the world.

In this context, what government can do is to provide a national environment in which creators can grow and take root, and then it can help ensure they have access to that larger stage. This, I submit, is one of the key functions of public policy in the information age.

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[8] Which is a *public* broadcaster, not a *state* broadcaster.