

Canada at 150: Celebrating its Liberal Values and Achievements

By Nick Gier

*Canada shall be the star towards which all men
who love progress and freedom shall come.*

—former Liberal Prime Minister Sir Wilfred Laurier

Americans crossing the far western Canadian-American border pass by the Peace Arch. The inscriptions read: “Children of a Common Mother,” “Brethren Dwelling Together in Unity,” and, referring to the open gates in the arch, “May These Gates Never Close.” We have indeed lived in unity and our border has always been open, with the exception that we now must show our passports.

When we went to war with Mother England, about 60,000 Loyalists, many of them reviled and even tortured, found refuge in Canada. Canada continued as a British colony until 1862, when it became a member of the Commonwealth with Queen Elizabeth as its titular head of government. Since 1867 the Liberal Party has won 23 of 42 elections; the Conservatives have won 13 and the Progressive Conservatives 6.

Canada and the U.S. Share Liberal Values

Since their founding, Canada and the U.S. have embraced the liberal political philosophy of the European Enlightenment. With his principles of the separation of powers and religious freedom, English philosopher John Locke was essential to our founding thinkers. Thomas Jefferson drew on Locke when he declared that all human beings have inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but with one exception: he substituted Locke’s property with happiness.

Even though only propertied males could vote, Jefferson’s preference for happiness and the general welfare was significant for early America’s commitment to the common man. Unfortunately, America’s slaves and women had to wait for the promise inherent in the Declaration of Independence and classical liberalism.

The American and French Revolutions were fought for the promotion of liberal values and principles. This meant that the distinction between the nobles who were free (the *liberi*) and those who served them (the *servi*) was forever extinguished. (The end to what I call classical conservatism.) All human beings were now free and noble, and this classical liberalism introduced the ideas of inalienable rights, religious freedom, free markets, and free trade.

Liberals also support the free movement of people across international borders, and are especially committed to those in need of refuge and new opportunities. But, as we shall see, it is only Canada that is fully embracing the motto on the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

We All Live in the House of Classical Liberalism

I like to say that we all—except for the theocratic hold-outs—live in the house of classical liberalism. It’s all a matter of balance: conservatives tend to favor traditional values over liberty

and equality, while today's liberals prioritize equality and liberty over tradition. The Libertarian Party puts free markets and personal liberty above all other values.

Adam Smith: Free Markets plus Public Education and Health

It is significant to note that Adam Smith, a contemporary of our founding thinkers and the father of free market capitalism, believed not only in public education (with state licensed teachers), but state funded hospitals, a state-run postal system, and government centers where clothing would be inspected for quality. He spent his last years working for the government as the Scottish Commissioner of Customs.

Smith, a professor of moral philosophy, also warned about the worship of wealth as an end in itself: "Wealth and greatness are often regarded with the respect and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue." Smith's liberal society would place moral and civil virtue above mere profit making.

Public Education and Health: Great Liberal Achievements

Canada's ruling Liberal Party, as well as our own Democrats, stand for equal opportunity, which does not mean the guarantee of equal outcomes. With this principle liberal governments provide funds for public education and health care. The government will pay for your education, but it will not guarantee a job or income, except for a minimum wage.

Citizens who suffer unnecessary illness will not be able to exercise their basic freedoms and support their families, so liberal governments around the world have provided universal health care. With its patchwork system of government and private insurance, the U.S. spends twice as much on health care while covering fewer people and suffering poorer health results. For example, Canadians in general live 2.5 years longer than Americans, and those suffering from cystic fibrosis survive on average 10 more years.

Canada: A More Consistent Commitment to Liberal Principles

Canada has committed itself to liberal values more consistently than the U.S., and the results have been impressive. In terms of social and economic mobility, Canada now ranks among some European countries in terms of "getting ahead." One study found that 50 percent of Americans will remain in the lowest 20th percentile, while only 20 percent of Canadians and Danes will remain at the bottom. The titles of recent essays sum it up: "Poor at 20; Poor for Life" and "The American Dream has moved North."

One of the drivers of increasing wages and building a middle class is the presence labor unions. In Canada and Europe unions are still strong (70 percent of Finnish workers are unionized as opposed to 12 percent in the U. S.), but in the U.S. they have been in steep decline since President Reagan fired the air traffic controllers in 1981. Law firms specializing in union busting have aided companies in undermining democracy in America's workplaces.

Canadians are Freer, Happier, Healthier, and Better Educated

In the 2015 World Happiness Report Canadians are again found among the Europeans. They rank fifth between Norway and Finland while we are in 15th place between Mexico and Brazil. Canada is also ahead of both Germany and the U.S. with regard to Life Satisfaction Scores.

One has to remember that Canada and the U.S. were settled by the same immigrant families with the same religions and values. That means that the excuse that “We can never be like the Europeans” is unfounded. Surely we can all do better for our families and those in need.

With regard to a college degree, 59 percent of Canadians have obtained one as opposed to 46 percent of Americans. (Idaho graduates 41.4 percent vs. Washington at 68.1 and Oregon at 55.5.) Americans used to take great pride in having the highest rate of home ownership, but that rate is now five percent higher in Canada. Furthermore, Canadians join the Europeans in working fewer hours and enjoying more leisure time.

Human Freedom Index: Canada 6th; U.S. 23rd

The libertarian Cato Institute, an unabashed promoter of the American Way, has ranked Canada 6th on its Human Freedom Index while the U.S. finds itself 23rd behind Poland. In terms of economic freedom the conservative Heritage Foundation ranks Canada 7th with the U. S. 17th, and Reporters Without Borders awards Canada 18th place for press freedom with the U.S. at a distant 41st.

Child Wellbeing and Maternal Mortality

Canada also ranks very high in child wellbeing. According to a UNICEF report, Canadians tied with Greece behind 11 European countries, while the U.S. was found at 18th between Hungary and the United Kingdom. Canada ranked second in the education of children and the U.S. came up to 12th in that category. Only 7 percent of low income teenagers in Canada become pregnant. This stands in stark and sad contrast to 22 percent of their counterparts in the U.S.

Most European countries pay child support to every single family (the Danish stipend is about \$200/per child/per month). Canada offers the same benefit but has decided to means test the amount, so that more money will flow from the rich to the poor.

Canada also joins the Europeans in offering 50 weeks of paid maternity leave, something our Congress has of course not even had the political will to consider. The U.S. has the highest rate of maternal deaths in the industrialized world, and American mothers are three times more likely to die in child birth than their Canadian sisters. Nearly 70 birthing American women die of preeclampsia each year, but proactive government doctors in Britain have brought their rate down to one per year.

Canada Does Not Flinch on Accepting Refugees

The Economist has been the mouthpiece for English liberalism since 1842, and a recent article on Canada has a provocative title: “The Last Liberals.” As the U.S. and Europe start to tighten immigration, Canada still maintains its liberal immigration policies. Newly elected Liberal Prime Justin Trudeau has personally greeted Syrian refugees at the airport offering them winter coats and food.

Among the 321,000 immigrants Canada received last year, 32,737 were Syrians. As a percentage of population this is slightly more than Germany’s 567,000, but we should be ashamed of 13,210 Syrians accepted in our country. (Trudeau has offered to take all the Syrians we have rejected.) As is the case with all immigrants their crime rate is no higher than long-term residents. Since 9/11 there have been two terrorist attacks (one killed in each) and arrests of terror suspects in 2006, 2010, and 2013.

The Great Recession: Canada Entered Late and Left Early

Primarily because of a well-regulated banking system, Canada entered the Great Recession about a year later than the U.S., and it emerged already one year later in November 2009. As one commentator put it: “The United States economy collapsed from within, while the Canadian economy was being hurt by its trade relationship with the United States.” The Canadian economy roared back at rate of 6.1 percent in 2010 and had created 215,900 new jobs, a number that the U.S., with nearly ten times the population, did not achieve until much later.

Good Balance of Taxes and Spending Lead to Lower Deficits

Canadians pay higher taxes but they, just like the Europeans, get a very good return on their investment. And contrary to GOP ideology, higher taxes do not kill economic growth. In the last quarter, Canada’s economy grew 3.7 percent while the U. S. was at an anemic 1.4 percent. Only with unemployment does the U. S. do better: 4.3 percent vs. 6.6 percent.

A steady revenue stream allows Canada to run an annual deficit of 2.7 percent of GDP. Our annual deficit has now climbed to 3.5 percent of GDP, after Obama had brought it down from over 10 percent to 3.2 percent, so it is Trump’s debt now. A proper balance of taxes and spending makes Canada’s total national debt much lower than ours: 32.5 percent of GDP versus the U.S. 106 percent. Trudeau has actually decided to increase the deficit 1.5 percent to pay for badly needed infrastructure upgrades.

Scott Gilmore: Will We Canadians Blow our Good Fortune?

Canadian Scott Gilmore verges on hyperbole when he boasts: “Whether it was due to geography or history or maybe even policy, we have arrived. Everything America once aspired to be, we now are. Not only have we achieved the fabled American Dream, we are arguably among the safest, healthiest, happiest human beings to have ever existed.”

Gilmore, however, is afraid that his compatriots are going to blow their good fortune: “No generation of Canadians has ever had more and been able achieve more than us—and no generation has been less ambitious. We have all the tools and all the opportunity to do great things, but no purpose, no national project, no imagination and no sense of determination.”

Canada’s Rust Belt Men Do Better than Ours

Gilmore fails to mention that Canada has its own rust belt, which has led to serious social and economic problems. Canada lost 500,000 factory jobs from 2000 to 2015, and a writer for *The Economist* states the “Southwestern Ontario and the Niagara peninsula are as blighted by industrial decay as depressed parts of Pennsylvania and Michigan.”

But, as the writer continues, “low-income men—Mr. Trump’s base in America—are less likely to die prematurely in Canada, which suggests they are less beaten down. In 2007 those in the bottom income quintile died 4.7 years earlier than those in the top. In the United States the gap was 12.1 years.”

Primarily because of industrial decline, both countries have a serious opioid problem. In 2015 Canadian pharmacists 534 opioid prescriptions issued per 1,000 population, while their American counterparts filled 775. The dramatic mortality rate difference must be due to much better health care. The GOP attack on Medicaid will make the American situation far worse.

Canada Has Fewer Suicides; Military rate same as Civilian

Canada ranks 87th in the world for fewer suicides while the U.S. stands in 48th place. Canada's rate is 10.4 per 100,000 and the U.S. rate is 12.6. There has been an epidemic of suicide among American soldiers—19.9 per 100,000 (23.8 in the Army)—but no significant increase for the Canadian military. Both countries sent soldiers to Iraq and Afghanistan and the rates are proportional, so do we, once again, attribute this dramatic difference to Canada's basic commitment to liberal values and human wellbeing?

Gun Deaths: 15,063 Americans vs. 178 Canadians

In 2016 15,063 Americans were killed by a fire arm with 3,795 of those being children from ages 1-17. In 2015 the number for gun deaths in Canada was 178, which adjusted for population would be 1,575. Again cultural backgrounds are not that different such that the NRA could claim that North Americans below the border are distinctive human beings. We came from the same European stock with the same religions, and we faced the same frontier wilderness and indigenous peoples.

One Canadian commentator offers this perspective on gun violence in the two countries: "Overall, Americans are almost 70 per cent more likely to die at the end of a gun—shot by someone else, by themselves, by accident—than Canadians are to die in a car accident. Thirty-five per cent more likely to be shot to death than Canadians are to die of a fall. American firearm death rates are almost three times higher than Canadian death rates of ovarian cancer and Parkinson's; 42 per cent higher than Canadian prostate cancer deaths; 10 per cent higher than pneumonia."

Canada's First Nations Not Celebrating

As most Canadians celebrate 150 years of progress, there are some who are not joining the party. Leah Gazan's father was a Dutch holocaust survivor, and Canada shamefully joined the U.S. in refusing let the M.S. Louis dock in their ports. It was carrying 937 Jewish refugees, 254 of whom died in the camps after the ship returned to Europe.

Gazan is also a member of the Wood Mountain Lakota nation and the famous Sioux chief Sitting Bull is in her family lineage. Her mother overcame a childhood of abuse in orphanages and convents, but rose to become one of the first psychiatric nurses in Saskatchewan. Gazan swears that "until the Canadian government stops violating fundamental indigenous human rights, I have nothing to celebrate."

What to do with Trump?

Finally, the Trudeau administration, along with every other country in the world, is wondering what to do about so-called president Donald Trump. Canada's foreign minister Chrystia Freeland reflects on the situation: "The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership puts into sharper focus the need for the rest of us to set our own clear and sovereign course."

"Something snapped in the last few weeks," said Roland Paris, a former foreign policy adviser to Mr. Trudeau. "The approach has been to maintain cordial relations with the White House while going to extraordinary lengths to activate American decision makers at all levels of the political system."

Just as American governors and mayors are reaching out to their U.S. counterparts and nations around the world, Canadian delegates are touring the U.S. and the world to solidify trade relationships and a commitment to the Paris climate accords. The result will be global solidarity on progressive and liberal issues and Trump and his nationalist allies will be left far behind.

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