

To be a Canadian Abroad

Brendan Baker

Sitting in a library in England on a late December night seems like an unlikely place to be able to change anything in Canada. Distance hinders direct action, but does provide the benefit of perspective: once I am outside Canada, I can see our country more clearly for what it is. Only when I leave Canada and compare it with the other places I have lived, be it Australia, Senegal or the UK in my case, can I truly see the extent of my country's precarious, still-innocent and naïve beauty, and fret at its subversive, emerging ugliness.

It is from outside that I can best see the awe-inspiring foundation of decency we have and the level of tolerance and respect we have established and enshrined in many of our societal structures. I am fiercely proud that I can vote, freely and without fear, and that my country's political spectrum still includes empathy for different cultures, religions and sexual orientations. I am fiercely proud of the belief of my fellow Canadians that universal health care is a basic Canadian human right. I am fiercely proud that we accommodate English and French speaking cultures, albeit with a few hiccups. I am fiercely proud that Canada ranks among the highest in the UN Development Programme rankings and that my home city of Vancouver consistently ranks as one of the best cities in the world in which to live. I am fiercely proud of our reputation for humanitarianism, and the willingness of many past great Canadians to stand up for causes that represent the best of pure human strength, decency and empathy, both at home and on the world stage. I am fiercely proud of our history of peacekeeping, our involvement in the fight to ban landmines, and our commitment during two World Wars. I am fiercely proud that we do not have a Vietnam, an Iraq or a history of colonialization of other countries. I am fiercely proud of Stephen Lewis and Romeo Dallaire.

But time and distance can qualify this pride, and provide a balance; I see an emerging ugliness that my fellow Canadians may not get the chance to see. I am proud of my right to vote freely, but discouraged that our political process allows a party to obtain a minority of our votes but rule with the casual arrogance of a majority. I am proud that our political spectrum includes tolerance of different views, but discouraged that those views are wasted when politicians are consumed by a rabid self-interested struggle for power. I am proud that we accommodate English and French Canadian cultures, but wonder when we will truly accommodate our aboriginal population as well, long since marginalised, ignored and impoverished in Canada, but still conveniently presented as cultural heritage when the world is watching. I am proud that Canada is one of the best countries to live in, but am painfully aware that our prosperity largely stems from a fortunate abundance of natural resources, often unsustainably managed

with predictably disastrous results. I am proud of Vancouver but shocked that it can also be home to the Downtown Eastside, with one of the highest rates of poverty and AIDS in the country. I am proud of our reputation of promoting basic human rights around the world, but distraught that this reputation is based on actions that largely ceased a decade ago. I am proud of our peacekeeping heritage, but depressed that we have long since failed to offer much help and pathetically rank behind over 30 countries in our commitment. I am proud of a history without Vietnam or Iraq, but worry about our challenges in Afghanistan and shake my head at our government's appeal to neutrality, while expressing overt support for one side in the recent Israel-Lebanon war.

I am proud of Stephen Lewis, but wonder why people like him are the exception, rather than standard representatives of our foreign policy. I am proud of Romeo Dallaire, but distressed that we have not yet learned from Rwanda and that we stand by and watch the ongoing scourge of ethnic cleansing in Darfur.

I have crossed the country twice by car, and I am deeply proud of our boundless oceans and stunning mountains, our prairies and forests. On the TransCanada seven days in one car is not a challenge, it is a brief glimpse of the unique and varied lives of Canadians. I bask in the knowledge that environmentalism is becoming more important to Canadians. I appreciate that our resources – harnessed by the forestry, mining and fishing industries - provide the economic base that allows me to live with prosperity, education and security. But I am in disbelief that we have managed our forests so unsustainably, allowed fish stocks to crash and, while holding decent standards in Canadian mining, allowed our mining companies to trample human and environmental rights in other countries.

Each poll that comes out ranking our trust in politicians at 14% causes bewilderment. Then it is shortly followed by another painful example of political posturing, childish bickering or corruption, leading me to wonder how they even managed 14%. To our politicians: when we gave you our votes on election day, we gave you our trust. When you engage in corruption in an advertising scandal, you abuse that trust. When you falsely accuse your opponents of criminal activity during a campaign, you abuse that trust. When you are elected under one party banner and immediately cross the floor, you abuse that trust. This is not an attack on any one party: all have proven themselves unworthy of the trust and support of Canadians, as have most politicians. For every Chuck Cadman we have 10 Stephen Harpers, Jack Laytons, Belinda Stronachs or David Emersons. Canadians do not want a minority government to be a constant power struggle with each party trying to score political points. We expect our politicians to respect the distribution of our votes and get to work on running our country.

Right now I feel that we have nowhere to turn politically. None of the three main parties has shown itself to be remotely worthy of our support. Polls of young people show a constant disillusionment with politics. Can you blame us? We are a sceptical and realistic generation. We have fewer idealistic illusions. We understand that extremes are not healthy, and expect our society to be managed rationally. We appreciate competence. And principle. It is ironic to be passionate about rational, moderate, principled leadership. So rarely will we be on the streets in protest. It is more likely that our political leadership will hear the deafening silence of a low voter turnout and continue to avoid dealing with the root causes of our disillusionment, glossing over them condescendingly with 'get out the vote'-type campaigns. Yes, it is my responsibility to vote, but it is their responsibility to give that vote meaning.

We have allowed our international reputation to erode, sliding from exemplary integrity in the past to hypocritical bickering in Bali. While our declining reputation is cause for distress, it is merely a symptom of a deeper lack of collective responsibility towards the world. Few countries have established such a perfect position to constructively engage the world, and help its myriad and disparate cultures work together. We have no history of colonialism overseas. We speak two of the most widely spoken languages. We still have the vestiges of a reputation for patience, intelligence and tolerance in engaging the rest of the world.

To a degree, we still have the respect of the world. But we must continue to earn it, not simply inherit it from the last generation's courage and integrity. Although I have lost the bulk of my faith in our politicians, I still believe in the power of average Canadians to make a difference, both within our borders and abroad. I still believe that, in spite of the vast distance that separates us from most of the world, we share a connection with it that has not been extinguished. I still believe that passion can triumph over indifference, that collective good trumps self interest, and that Canada has an important and positive role to play in the world. And if it is ordinary Canadians that stand up and seize that role, then so much the better.

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