

Diversity and Complexity:

Rethinking Can-Am relations

Many metaphors have been used to describe the relationship between Canada and the United States ranging from those of family (such as cousins) to animals (most famously, an elephant and mouse) to geography (usually, neighbours). Despite their differences, these metaphors all include two key assumptions: That there is a great familiarity between Canada and the United States, and that the closeness of the relationship is inevitable. Just as family members, animals, and homeowners are forced to learn about each other, it is assumed that Canadian and American leaders know a great deal about each other's thinking, habits and priorities. And, as implied by the familiar metaphors, the assumptions of familiarity and closeness include elements of affection and fear although, of course, the intensity of these emotions is much greater on the Canadian side.

The bad news is that history does not give much credence to the familiar metaphors. Moreover, their appropriateness is becoming even less convincing as the 21st century unfolds. The good news is that new perspectives on the countries' respective histories suggest promising ways to rethink the relationship in the rapidly changing international context. The result could be an improved relationship that does better justice to both countries and may enhance all our prospects for the coming years.

Two examples illustrate how historical research is undermining long-established assumptions about Canada and the United States: attitudes toward diversity and attitudes toward complexity. In both cases, the histories of the two countries have produced starkly different attitudes toward these phenomena. Canadians see diversity as enriching, and see complexity as inherent in human conditions. The point is not that Canada is a more diverse society; in fact, scholars suggest that the United States is at least as diverse culturally and socially and more diverse economically. Similarly, the claim is not that Canadians are faced



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with more complexity than are Americans; indeed, it is hard to imagine more complex challenges facing any country. Rather, the major difference lies in how the two countries interpret diversity and complexity. For Canadians, diversity is good while complexity cannot be avoided. Cultural, social, and economic diversity strengthen and enrich society. Complexity must be embraced because there is no core simplicity within such complexity; humans are complex beings that interact in complex ways. Taken together, these attitudes explain a great deal about popular opinion and public policy in Canada.

The strong preference in Canada for the candidacy of John Kerry was not based on self-interested evaluations of political platforms. In fact, Kerry's insistence on multilateral military action or protectionist trade policies should have alienated Canadian support. The crucial factors in Kerry's favour included his perception of complexity and his recognition of diversity especially on the world stage. Kerry's reported flip-flops endeared him to Canadians as he appeared to be struggling with what he saw as complex issues evolving in complex times. Similarly, Kerry's idea that different countries of the world might legitimately see things differently was music to Canadian ears. The fact that specific policy proposals seemed quite anti-Canadian was discounted in favour of attitudes that seemed quite Canadian.

So, how should we move forward to enhance Canadian-American relations? One point of departure is to recognize that, for historical reasons, the two countries share many things but also differ significantly on certain fundamental presuppositions such as how diversity and complexity are interpreted. Rather than assuming that bilateral agreements should be arrived at easily since Canada and the United States

know each other well, the appropriate approach would be to accept that reaching understandings will be always be difficult since certain underlying convictions are distinct across the border. Indeed, we should celebrate how well the Canadian-American relationship has worked over the decades despite, rather than because of, these convictions. Rather than being annoyed that there are irritants, both countries should view with pride the fact that there has been nothing more serious to threaten national interactions. Not only has the reality of vastly different sizes been significantly overcome at the diplomatic table but the deep differences in key attitudes have not prevented effective agreements on the major bilateral issues. This historic pattern has continued during the past four years and, with better recognition of the differing interpretations of diversity and complexity in the two countries, could be improved during the second George W. Bush presidency.

The history of recent centuries also suggests the intriguing possibility that the changing world stage may encourage Canada and the United States to develop an unprecedented empathy as both countries come to grips with the rise of a new global power. It would be simplistic to predict that the 21st century will be China's century just as the 18th is associated with France, the 19th with Great Britain and the 20th with the United States. Nonetheless, the prospect of Canada and the United States drawing closer together in terms of fundamental presuppositions as they increasingly reorient themselves from north-south to east-west is not far-fetched. And a continental – indeed, global – embracing of diversity and complexity would enhance all our prospects for peace, justice, and liberty around the world.

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