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Clash in Cultures & Opinions Emerge from War Debate

By Zack Gross

Polling firm results and letters to the Editor from across Canada are one way to “take the temperature” of our country’s citizenry on the issues of the day. An excellent little paperback that came out this past summer is “What Canadians Think” by Darrell Bricker and John Wright of Ipsos-Reid, one of Canada’s leading pollsters.

Like any good Canadian, upon purchasing the book and opening it to the table of contents, I was immediately attracted to the section on what Canadians think of Americans and US policies. Another excellent source on public opinion is coffee shop talk - plumbers, handymen and local farmers offering clear, simple pronouncements on important issues, such as the state of our roads, the tax system, the world’s great religions and, of course, US foreign policy.

While simultaneously handling water filters, bags of salt and measuring devices, our plumber – in response to how to bring peace to the world – said with assurance, “Yep, you just gotta take the toys away from the boys!” As I agree with him, I’ll hire him again. The handyman, on the other hand, will have to look elsewhere for future employment!

Canadian identity seems to always include a comparison of ourselves with our southern neighbours. We often describe ourselves in ways that distinguish our values and culture from the US, while at the same time acknowledging that they are our most important trading partner and political ally. Polls show that about three-quarters of Canadians are pleased to have the US as our neighbour and see the relationship as a positive thing. One-fifth of Canadians would like to work in the US. About 2% of Canadians actually would like to see us fully join the United States of America, says What Canadians Think. That’s almost a million people!

Our new military “partnership” with the US is obviously a subject for debate amongst many Canadians. Polls show that 78% of Canadians believe that George Bush’s actions in Iraq and Afghanistan have either made the world less safe or have had no effect one way or the other. Canadian opinion on the US’s role in our world in general is evenly split, but three-quarters of Canadians (a figure that is growing) oppose the military initiatives that George Bush has undertaken. Interestingly for Bush, US public opinion is not much different.

Canada was differentiated from the US during the Chretien years by stands we took on decriminalization of marijuana, gay marriage, gun registration and capital punishment, some of which were new initiatives and others that were longstanding policies. Our culture was seen by Canadians as more progressive, less individualistic, more inclusive and less strict or violent. Under our new Harper government, some of

those lines are being redrawn. This includes our role militarily in the world. Is it changing from a more neutral, peacekeeping role to a more aggressive and partisan one? Are we more firmly in the NATO camp, and less so in the UN camp?

Even though Canada ranks higher on the UN Development Index and other measures of civil societies than the US, Britain or Australia, and even though we massively see ourselves as more peaceful and more socially progressive than Americans, we cannot deny that we still face many issues of racism, crime, environmental degradation and poverty in our country. But, what signs are there that our culture is becoming more American, more “male”, under the weight of current wars and US cultural influence?

I watched with interest when the Canadian military took its recruiting to big city mosques recently, looking to broaden the membership of its forces. Although the role we are playing now in the world is a concern, in our world today a broad military can play an important role at home and overseas. I watched with horror, though, when the news reported that the military was stepping up public exhibits of weaponry and showed small children handling machine guns and bazookas. Indeed, as my plumber said, to change the world, you have to take the toys away from the boys!

Recent polls show that at least 30% of Americans (36% in the Southern States) think that Canada is actually just another state in the Union. When Americans are asked which country is their closest ally, 18% name Canada and 56% name Great Britain. When they are asked which country is their largest trading partner, only 14% correctly name Canada, while 52% incorrectly name Japan or China. So, our identity crisis has cause!

Pierre Trudeau described our relationship with the US as “similar to sleeping with an elephant”. Mexicans have described the situation in a different way: “Oh, to be so far from heaven, and so close to the United States!” The subject is a complex one. We must think through just who we are, as Canadians – what makes us special and what positive role we can play in the world. Only then can we withstand pressures from the south.

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