

How America could out-Canada Canada

Michael Adams

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"I take tips from Canada on a lot of things." - **Barack Obama**, Summit of the Americas, April, 2009

I grew up during a time when it was said that everything that happened in the United States would eventually come to Canada. For me, the most evocative annual illustration of this was the auto show at Toronto's Exhibition Place, where Detroit's latest contributions to mobility and status were put on display for aspirational Ontarians to drool over. I beamed with pride the day my dad brought home a spanking new 1955 Chevrolet Bel Air two-tone salmon and grey convertible. We were rich - just as rich as my Michigan cousins.

Even beyond the world of commerce, as the tempestuous sixties began to take shape, the idealism of the civil-rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, both obviously products of America and its political culture, spilled over the border. My generation of Canadians, especially those of us who were the first in our families to go to university, joyfully brought to campus ersatz versions of the idealism our American baby boomer cousins displayed.

The Americans elected John Kennedy in 1960; we responded by electing Pierre Trudeau in 1968. (Michael Ignatieff is hoping for a reprise.) And let us not forget rock 'n' roll, the birth-control pill, pot and hallucinogens. Cars, money, politics, sex, drugs and music. It all spilled over into Canada through radio, television and the movies; first we watched, then we imitated.

After my formative years, the pattern continued. Stagflation in America, then Canada. The backlash against the New Deal in America was capped off with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 - government was the problem, not the solution.

Four years later, Canada elected Brian Mulroney, and Irish eyes were smiling on both sides of the border. Canada was proud to be little sister to such a great power. Four years later, Canadians affirmed a free-trade agreement with the United States. We were getting with the program and happily signed on with the Washington consensus declaring the world to be the playground for global capitalism.

But more was going on in the two societies than these superficial similarities suggest. Canada was not necessarily destined to follow in America's slipstream. In fact, the past decade has shown Canada to be ahead in a number of surprising ways. Our social liberalism, embodied by same-sex marriage, is the envy of U.S. liberals. Our banking

system is currently the envy of the capitalist world, and our prudent consumers are much less burdened by personal, mortgage and credit-card debt than our American cousins.

In the mid-1990s, the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board was set up to wisely invest contributions to Canada's universal public pension plan, while George W. Bush's administration (unsuccessfully) promoted the privatization of that country's social security/public pension system.

All Canadians have health insurance, whereas 45 million Americans are not covered. Those who do have it there face co-payments and caps, leading to overwhelming medical expenses - the reason for half of personal bankruptcies. The private health insurance paid into by U.S. workers is the major factor in "unfunded liabilities," which are leading automotive companies into bankruptcy protection. (Canadian auto workers have their national medicare system to fall back on.) Canada's universal program costs 50 per cent less than the U.S. mixed public-private system and produces healthier citizens and longer life expectancies - while imperfect, our system is both more efficient and more effective. Canada also continues to enjoy murder rates one-third as high as America's, partly because Canada has maintained stricter gun laws since the 1930s.

But just as the story of strong America and tag-along Canada could not last forever, neither could this one. America, the land of self-reinvention, has elected Barack Obama, who promises to take another shot at bringing health coverage to every American, at improving the public education system that is supposed to prepare every child equally well for the great contest of capitalism, at reaching out to international allies with greater respect and humility, at restoring sanity and integrity to personal and corporate fiscal life.

Generational change is making Americans more socially liberal, and the implosion of the American credit markets is leading the country to recognize the role of government in protecting citizens from bad luck and bad decisions. Even on the environmental front, Kyoto-signing Canadians now find themselves waiting for Mr. Obama or California or someone in America to devise a climate-change policy so they will have something to follow.

For now, it seems that Mr. Obama is bringing a little bit of Canada - especially our respect for the role of government - to America. Perhaps the old saw is no longer accurate. Might Canadians finally be assuming their rightful place at the leading edge of social, cultural and political change on the North American continent?

Maybe. But with America's penchant for radical renewal, rapid change and innovation, it's possible that Canadians will soon find themselves back in the role of tentative followers, wondering how their clever cousins managed to out-Canada Canada.

Michael Adams is author of Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism and president of the Environics group of companies.