

# CANADIANS, TOO, FAULT THEIR POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND LEADERS

*By Michael Adams and  
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Canadians are among the luckiest people on earth. That, undoubtedly, is what many of the people wanting to emigrate to Canada think. And it's what the United Nations seems to say. The United Nations Development Program, on its 1992 human development index—a combined score based on several quality of life indicators—ranked Canada first among the nations of the world. The United States placed only sixth.

But is that how Canadians see themselves? Are they as content, secure and grateful as one would expect the citizens of such a fortunate land to be?

## Political Angst

Our surveys show that most recognize they have it pretty good, compared to people in many other parts of the world. Nevertheless, Canadians have deep misgivings about the way their country is being managed, and they are increasingly pessimistic about the future. This public angst stems in part from the psychological impact of living through a two-year recession. But our data indicate that today's anxiety runs deeper than concern over the current economic situation, that it speaks to an intense frustration with the performance of the nation's political institutions.

A November 1991 Environics survey compared Canadian and American attitudes on a number of quality of life dimensions, and compared current data

with tracking data from 1986. The 1991 survey found that large majorities of Canadians were satisfied with the environment in their area, with social and health services for the poor and elderly, and with their opportunities to get ahead. The environment was the only area where there had been an appreciable decline in satisfaction since 1986.

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Only a minority (34%) of Canadians said, however, that they were satisfied with the Canadian system of government. This proportion represented a decline of 17 points since 1986. A sizable majority (62%, an increase of 16 points since 1986) said they were dissatisfied with their system of government. (It is interesting to note that Americans expressed a similar—in fact, an even more precipitous—decline in satisfaction with their system of

government. Although a slight majority of 52% said they were satisfied with the American system of government, this proportion was down 24 points from 1986, and the proportion who said they were dissatisfied had more than doubled in five years.)

Looking further at Canadian attitudes toward their government, Environics' quarterly survey of 2,005 adult Canadians, conducted in June 1992, found that only 19% were satisfied with the performance of their federal government. Even fewer, 16%, approved of the performance of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, and fewer still—just 14%—said they would vote for his party if an election were held that day. (Actually, that 14% somewhat overstates the case since, according to polling custom, it excludes the 24% who were undecided or refused to state a preference. The Tories' actual support in June stood at an unbelievably low 10%.)

## Role of Government: A Continent Divides

In spite of sharing the same continent and many parallel historical experiences, Canadians and Americans do in fact differ in some important ways. True, as consumers, Canadians are virtually identical to their American cousins. But as citizens, they have been more European in their expectations of the state and the balance to be struck between individual and collective rights.

The November 1991 comparison of Canadian and American attitudes, for instance, found that 46% of Canadians (compared to 37% of Americans) believe the government has a responsibility to ensure everyone has a job, and that 74% of Canadians (compared to 68% of Americans) believe the government should reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor. Tracking data from 1986 indicate that Canadians are now less likely to favor these two kinds of economic intervention on the part of their governments. There was an overall decrease of five points in the proportion who would charge the government with providing guarantees of full employment and a decrease of eight points in the proportion who strongly agree that the government is responsible for the redistribution of income.

### **Ethnicity and Language Still Divide Canada**

Since the nation's founding in 1867, Canada's politics has been characterized by a process referred to as "elite accommodation." If Americans are united or divided by their "values," Canadians are united or divided by "interests" (primarily linguistic and regional). It has been largely through the brokering of these competing interests by the political elites that the country has stayed together. Today, the legitimacy—not to mention the efficacy—of this process of "elite accommodation" has come under serious strain, as international economic and cultural forces erode the ties that once bound francophones to anglophones and eastern Canadians to their compatriots in the west.

As is evident in the data on current Canadian public opinion presented in this article, Canadians are more than merely unhappy with the current political incumbents. They are fundamentally dissatisfied with the political institutions in this country: the federal system, the parliamentary system, and the system of party politics. This, in spite of the fact that government has traditionally played a large role in Canadian life and must fairly be credited with building the social welfare state that enables Canada to enjoy its

enviable ranking in this year's United Nations human development index.

Quebec, the home of Canada's French-speaking population, is ambivalent at best about its continuing participation in the Canadian federation and may be led to a more extreme form of sovereignty than most of its citizens actually want if a new constitutional accommoda-

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tion cannot be found with the rest of the country. Indeed, the province has quite a different vision of the basic founding principles of Canadian confederation from that which has evolved in most of the rest of the country. Quebec holds to the concept of Canada as the marriage of two founding peoples—the French and the English. In the other nine provinces, Canada is seen as a pact between ten equal provincial partners.

The current round of constitutional discussions has served to highlight this very basic difference between English and French Canada. The whole process has been a divisive and fatiguing exercise, and the chances for a successful accommodation are still uncertain. It would not be overly cynical to suggest that, if Canadians vote to accept the latest package of constitutional reforms, many will do so more to end the seemingly endless haggling than to express their support for the specific elements proposed for constitutional reform.

On the question of Quebec's status in Canada, Environics' June 1992 survey found that 44% of Quebecers favored their province becoming an independent country; this proportion, however, was at

one of its lowest points since May 1990. [This issue's Public Opinion Report contains further data on Canadian's attitudes on Quebec's status.]

In a May 1980 referendum, Quebecers rejected a form of sovereignty-association by a margin of 60 to 40%. But, if Quebec's Premier Bourassa cannot sell the constitutional package he recently negotiated with the federal government and the other nine provincial premiers, his Liberals will have little chance of winning back political support from the separatist Parti Quebecois (who currently lead Bourassa's Liberals by a substantial 56% to 34% margin, according to a mid-August poll conducted by the Quebec polling firm of CROP Inc.).

The results of a national Environics poll conducted between August 28 and September 1, 1992, indicate Premier Bourassa will not find it easy to sell the constitutional package in the October 26 referendum. According to the poll, 43% of Quebecers (compared to 53% of other Canadians) say they would vote "oui"; 39% of Quebecers (compared to 20% of other Canadians) say they would vote "non".

### **No Respite For Incumbents**

No matter what happens, a "solution" to the present constitutional dilemma is unlikely to do any of the current incumbents in Ottawa or the provinces much good in a partisan sense. Canadians view the constitutional crisis as something created by the politicians themselves—as opposed to the economy or the environment, which are viewed as "real problems."

At the federal level, the party preference standings as of June 1992 have the Liberals in first place, with 40%, and the New Democrats a distant second, with 21%. The Conservatives trail in third spot with 14%—up two points from their record low of 12% in March. The Tories are followed by the newly formed right-of-center Reform Party, which stands at 13% nationally (and 17% in English Canada,

where they intend to field candidates in the next federal election). The separatist Bloc Quebecois—formed since the last election by dissident Conservatives and Liberal members of parliament—stands at 10% nationally (40% in Quebec).

With their current level of support, the Liberals (who have governed Canada for much of this century) are positioned to return to office with a substantial majority. But few are willing to cede them the next election. Their leader, Jean Chrétien, while considerably more popular than Brian Mulroney, is disapproved of by a plurality of Canadians overall, and by two-thirds of the electorate in his home province of Quebec. (Quebecers are even more critical of their other native son, Brian Mulroney, whose disapproval rating stands at 71%.)

It is clear that Canadian politics is still suffering from the leadership vacuum described in "The Unraveling of the Ties that Bind," which we wrote for the May/June 1991 edition of Public Perspective. The "balkanization" of Canadian politics, which was also described in the 1991 article, continues as well. The June 1992 survey found that, in Alberta, the Reform party's home base, this so-called splinter party is in first place, with the support of 40% of voters. In Quebec, where the Bloc Quebecois would field candidates, they lead the other parties, also with the support of 40% of the electorate.

### Can Mulroney Come Back?

It should be noted, however, that despite the Tories' dismal numbers, few opinion leaders are willing to completely write off Mulroney and the Conservatives' chances for re-election. They remember the Tory comeback from a low of 24% of popular support in December 1987 to a huge win in the 1988 election (in which the party won 43% of the popular vote and, currently, 158 of the 295 seats in the House of Commons). Fortunately for the prime minister, he doesn't have to call an election until the fall of 1993, an eternity away from the present in terms of what can happen in the political life of a nation.

The 1988 Canadian election, unlike its American counterpart, was fought primarily on the issue of the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement, which the Mulroney government duly ratified after its re-election victory. The outcome of the next federal election could affect Canada-American relations significantly if the Liberals win and continue the stance inaugurated by their previous leader, John Turner, who categorically opposed the 1988 Canada-U.S. free trade agreement. The current leader, Jean Chrétien, is less dogmatic in his opposition to the 1988 agreement and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) recently negotiated among Canada, the United States and Mexico. However, Mr. Chrétien and the Liberals could be induced by public opinion to harden their equivocal stance from a vague promise to renegotiate these agreements to a morally binding commitment to withdraw from them unilaterally.

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### Free Trade

The June 1992 survey found that 44% of Canadians still believe in the concept of free trade between the two countries; however, this proportion represents a significant decline in support from the 60% range reported in the mid-1980s. As for the actual agreement negotiated in 1988, its public support eroded from a high point of 47% just after the 1988 federal election to a low of 24% in March of this year; in June 1992, support had increased slightly, to 28%. For the 64% who now oppose the existing Canada-U.S. agreement, it is viewed simply as a bad deal for

Canada, one that has exacerbated, perhaps even caused, most of the country's current economic woes.

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The Conservatives certainly have the power to ratify the NAFTA agreement they were party to negotiating with the United States and Mexico. It's not yet clear how far the Liberals will go in opposing these two agreements. Much depends on their fortunes in the polls. If the New Democratic Party—which, together with its allies in the labor unions, adamantly oppose both deals—begins to garner more public support at the expense of the Liberals, then we may see a hardening of the Liberal position on this issue. Certainly, NAFTA will be a hard sell among the Canadian public.

We said at the beginning of this article that Canadians' anxiety reflects an acute dissatisfaction with the nation's institutions, particularly its political institutions. As we discussed in our 1991 article, Canada continues to labor under the strain of strong centrifugal forces and demands for empowerment from a number of regional and other special interests. The prime minister and the premiers can expect little public gratitude for any success they may have in restoring constitutional peace, or in ameliorating the country's economic woes, unless they address these very real concerns about process and accountability.

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