

Canada: What is a Nation?

Canada shouldn't exist (at least not according to the opinion of some theorists and politicians). We've broken virtually every rule assumed to be true when it came to building a nation, e.g. we weren't one race but many; we didn't have one official language but two (and Canadians literally speak dozens upon dozens more); and our history is not exactly a single shared narrative but a collection of stories. Nations are supposed to be simple things. But Canada is complicated.

According to 19th century standards, a nation is a simple thing; it exists where people belong to the same ethnic group, speak the same language, worship the same God in the same way, and share a common history. Regardless of what country they are from nationalists virtually always believe their country is superior to all others. For this reason you'll find Germans in the 1940s insisting they belong to a so-called master race or you'll find Americans in the 21st century insisting their country is the greatest in the world. Interestingly, Canadians love their country yet they do not typically hold their country as a standard by which all other countries should be measured. On the contrary, although Canadians will admit their country does some things well they'll also acknowledge other countries do other things well. We celebrate diversity. This hasn't always been the case of course. There are numerous examples in Canadian history where the English majority (the *one*) attempted to push out, control, assimilate, or otherwise erase, etc. minorities (the *many*). Anglophones in Canada have at times had a very limited definition of nation. In particular, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries English Canadians tended to believe everyone in Canada had to share certain similarities in common like race, language or religion. They believed the country would be weak or fall apart if its citizens didn't share these similarities. Yet, today we are as strong as ever as a multicultural society that celebrates diversity.

Just like democracy, nationalism didn't "pop out" fully formed in its present form. Instead, it developed in fits and starts evolving with the passage of time and the changing of circumstances. Pinpointing when modern nations first appeared in history is difficult. Some scholars claim England was the first nation-state. They draw our attention to the year 1689 when that kingdom passed its constitution (*Bill of Rights*) in to law thereby establishing a constitutional monarchy. Other scholars suggest that the French Revolution (1789) resulted in the creation of the first modern national identity. The problem with this particular view is that only 50% of France's people actually spoke French at the time of the revolution (Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, page 34). Ultimately, nations are neither created by simply limiting

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the power of the King, e.g. England, etc. or by lopping off his head, e.g. France. In reality, nations are not simple things. By comparison to basically every other country on the planet Canada is indeed *complicated*. Although the country is not without its problems Canada works. The reason it works is quite possibly because, to quote author John Raulston Saul “[Canadians] accept their non-conformity with some ease. They live it and so it makes sense” (*Reflections of a Siamese Twin*, page 9).

Eventually the people of France and England did become *nations*. However, not for the reasons you might think. For example, one did not become a lover of France just by virtue of speaking French. Instead, I identified with France when my family, my friends, my neighbor, etc. was threatened by an invasion of Englishmen or Germans. Nations, and national identity in particular, are created through a destructive process called *war*. Wars make nationalists and nationalists make nations. In the case of the United States, it took *two* major wars, e.g. American Revolution and the Civil War, etc. for it to become a modern nation-state. In the case of the Dominion of Canada, it became a country with the passage of the *British North America Act* in 1867; however, we did not become a nation just because we’d received our independence from Britain. Instead, we became a nation in our own right following our success during the World War I Battle of Vimy Ridge in France (1917). The shared sacrifice of Canada’s soldiers (French, English, First Nation, etc.) gave Canadians a shared sense of pride and therefore a shared sense of identity. War is not the only way to build a nation. Yet, it seems to play a huge part in the development of a national identity. To be fair, though, this has not always been the case with Canada, i.e. during both World War I and World War II the French and English were frequently at odds with one another. Nonetheless, people referring to themselves as “Canadians” emerged from both conflicts and continue to live in to the present.

Interestingly, Canada is now a nation of many languages, religions, cultures and histories. According to 19th and 20th century political theorists the Canadian experiment with multiculturalism should have failed. In the 1990s the French separatist leader, Lucien Bouchard, remarked that “Canada was not a country”. He assumed that a nation had to be simple (the one) in order to succeed. Yet, in 2004 Prime Minister Paul Martin remarked “Canada was the world’s first and only post-modern nation.” By this he meant that we as “the many” we’d successfully beat the odds, broken all the rules, etc. and emerged as a nation still.