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## Politics

**Should Canada pull out of NAFTA?**

October 12, 2005

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Last week's poll

## Closer than you think

**Turns out we don't hate Americans after all. In fact, on the big issues, we think a lot alike, says a new poll.**

STEVE MAICH

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We scorn their activist foreign policy. We mock their folksy politicians and sneer at their crude red-state provincialism. We resent their overwhelming cultural influence, and bristle at being treated as an afterthought. We've squabbled over everything from trade and the environment to security and foreign relations. And more and more, conventional wisdom holds, we are two nations going our separate ways: the moderate and sophisticated northern nation, stuck next to an increasingly obdurate empire.

But, like most conventional wisdom, much of it is plain wrong. Despite everything you've heard in recent years about our crumbling relationship with the United States, most Canadians and Americans want the two countries to get a whole lot closer in the years ahead. A new poll by Ottawa's SES Research, in conjunction with the University at Buffalo, suggests that, on a wide range of issues from national security to energy policy, Canadians and Americans want more co-operation, not less. And when it comes to our perceptions of each other, the two nations are still defined more by our similarities than our differences, and often don't live up to our shared stereotypes. Perhaps most remarkably, on many issues that supposedly divide us, Canadians think a lot like Americans do.

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To those who've spent recent years on the front lines of Canada-U.S. diplomacy, this goodwill is really no surprise. "The fact of the matter is, there are thousands of things that go right with this relationship every single day. It's only the disputes that get the publicity," says Paul Cellucci, the former U.S. ambassador to Canada. "It doesn't really matter what the dispute of the day might be. Our ties are too deep, we're too interconnected, and we're too dependent on each other to do anything other than continue to work together. That's what we always do."

Nowhere is that more true than on questions of security and economy. Most pundits agree Canadians are deeply suspicious of the U.S.-led war on terror, and that the war in Iraq has driven a wedge between the two countries when it comes to questions of national security. But that divide doesn't show up in the most recent polling numbers. According to the SES survey of just over 1,000 Americans and 1,100 Canadians taken in late August, citizens of both countries advocate a more integrated system of military and emergency response. Asked if Canada and the U.S. "should be moving toward greater and closer co-operation" on issues of national security, 65 per cent of Canadians and 73 per cent of Americans wanted a "much closer" or "somewhat closer" relationship. When asked specifically about anti-terrorism measures, Canadians are 74 per cent in favour of closer collaboration, compared to 86 per cent in favour in the U.S.

"We're of one mind on security," says Munroe Eagle, associate professor of political science at the University at Buffalo, and one of the people who first conceived of the study to track public attitudes toward continental integration. "What shows up clearly is that we share a great deal, including an interest in creating a secure North America."

And yet, that shared consensus has not been reflected either in media coverage or in Canadian policy in recent years. Instead, Canada-U.S. relations have been defined by a string of disagreements, ranging from the petty to the profound. There was the erroneous media speculation post 9/11 that the terrorist hijackers may have entered the U.S. through Canada. The prime minister's top spokesperson referred to U.S. President George W. Bush as a "moron." A Liberal backbencher publicly said she hated all Americans and derided them as "bastards." Then there were the more substantive disputes over Canadian beef and softwood lumber. Last week, Prime Minister Paul Martin travelled to New York and called the U.S.

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position on softwood lumber "nonsense" and fretted over plans to drill for oil in Alaska's wildlife refuge. Speeches like this play well with testy Canadian voters, but they do little to repair relations with a White House still simmering over Canada's refusal to support the war in Iraq, and Martin's rejection of the U.S. missile defence plan.

All this acrimony seems to have fuelled a decline in Canadians' regard for their neighbour. In 1999, an Environics poll found 71 per cent of Canadians held a favourable view of the United States. In 2003, a survey for the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that had fallen to 63 per cent. And this year, the number was down to 59 per cent. In late 2004, a poll by COMPAS for Global Television found 48 per cent of respondents felt more "anti-American" lately, compared to just 23 per cent who felt more "pro-American."

That, in turn, has brought on a wave of anxiety among Canada's political and business elites fearing the breakdown of lucrative trade links. Last month, Lee H. Hamilton, president of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington, spoke to an audience in Toronto, and warned of grave consequences should the relationship be allowed to fray further. "I am concerned that Americans and Canadians are less willing to meet with one another," he said. "Fewer Americans are heading north; fewer Canadians are headed south. Whatever the reason, the trend is disturbing and could become alarming."

Some Canadians, however, prefer to celebrate this. Not since before Confederation has blatant anti-Americanism been so fashionable. Self-congratulatory cultural analysis has become something of a cottage industry in recent years, dwelling on the distinctions that make this country "un-American" -- from lower rates of obesity and fewer SUVs on the road, to lower crime rates and more inclusive social programs. In 2003, Michael Adams, president of the polling firm Environics, produced the authoritative work on this subject, called *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values*. Based on years of polling data, Adams assembled a compelling portrait of two countries going their separate ways. As Canada is becoming more tolerant, progressive, secular and liberal, the U.S. is becoming more rigid, insular, religious and conservative, he argued.

Adams stands by that analysis, but adds that just because the countries' values are diverging in many ways, it doesn't mean our common interests are disappearing. And most Canadians understand that distinction, he says. For that reason Adams remains optimistic about the relationship despite what he sees as deepening rifts. "We're right next door, so there are many things that we just have to get along on," Adams says. "George W. Bush isn't going to sit in bed, take a .357 Magnum and start blowing off his own toes. We're one of those toes, and he knows that." Besides, there's nothing contradictory about two nations with divergent cultures still wanting close collaboration on matters of mutual interest, he says. Such relationships exist all over the world.

But, at the very least, the latest poll results provide some reason to question whether people on either side of the 49th parallel really are growing apart. For instance, in spite of widespread anger in Canada over the illegal deportation of Canadian citizen Maher Arar from the U.S. to Syria, and deep suspicion over the indefinite detention of suspected militants at Guantánamo Bay, Canadians still generally see the U.S. as a land of similar values. Asked in the SES survey which country is most like their own in

terms of human rights, Canadians picked the U.S. more than any other (43 per cent) and Americans picked Canada (51 per cent) as their human rights soulmate. Britain finished second in both cases.

While Canadian commentators have tended to portray the United States as trampling on international consensus in Iraq and elsewhere, Canada is generally presented as the consensus-building advocate of soft power. But it seems that stereotype is misleading, or at least too simplistic. SES asked Canadians and Americans if their country should "follow its own interests, even if it leads to conflict with other nations." Canadians were more willing than Americans to step on toes in pursuit of self-interest. In fact, 61 per cent of Canadians said self-interest should guide decision-making, compared to just 51 per cent of Americans. "What this should tell us is that stereotypes are just confusing, and neither country knows the other as well as we think we do," says Dwight Mason, senior partner at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and a former U.S. diplomat. "Of course, countries *should* pursue their own interests. The good thing, when it comes to the U.S. and Canada, is that our interests tend to coincide pretty well."

**Our interests seem to coincide** just as much on substantive economic issues. For months, newspapers have been screaming about high gas prices, and left-wing opponents have wailed that free trade in energy has exacerbated the spike in Canadian pump prices. And yet Canadians are almost as enthusiastic as Americans about the prospect for closer integration of the continent's energy market. The SES survey found that 85 per cent of Canadians and 89 per cent of Americans think it's "very important" or "somewhat important" to develop an integrated energy policy to reduce North America's reliance on Middle Eastern oil.

Adams, however, isn't convinced that any of this represents a significant meeting of our national minds. It's easy, he says, for people to agree on soft concepts like "greater co-operation." But introduce thornier issues such as defending national sovereignty and respect for international treaties and you quickly run across more contentious territory. For instance, support for a North American energy policy seems eminently reasonable at first blush, but "if you include in that question issues like the Kyoto protocol and NAFTA, you'd get a different answer," Adams says. "For every one of these questions, I want to ask another 10."

It can also be difficult to identify just how much of Canada's purported animosity toward Americans is actually just ill-feeling toward George W. Bush and the current White House administration. A POLLARA survey published in February 2004 found that 67 per cent of Canadians had a generally positive attitude toward the U.S., but 58 per cent said they disapproved of the current President. By the same token, polls in early 2004 showed the majority of Canadians supported the ballistic missile defence plan. But as time wore on, and the Bush administration appeared to be exerting pressure on the Liberal government in Ottawa, polls swung the other way. By the time Paul Martin announced he would not participate, public opinion was strongly against the plan, and Martin's decision was overwhelmingly endorsed. Does this suggest deepening antipathy toward our ally, or is it simply a reaction against a particular political style?

Cellucci, for one, believes Canadian and American public opinion has been distorted by media coverage. But if Canadian media have been guilty of exaggerating the level of discord, they are not alone. In the days following 9/11, many American news outlets, including the renowned CBS

newsmagazine show *60 Minutes*, hyped suggestions that Canada's liberal immigration policies and lax border controls represented a serious gap in U.S. homeland security. The "blame Canada" chorus in the U.S. Congress was largely responsible for pushing through new restrictions on visitors, including a policy requiring Canadians to have a passport to enter the U.S. by the end of 2007.

But again, this pervasive anti-Canadian theme in the U.S. media has failed to arouse much suspicion among the American public. For most Americans, at least those who have any opinion at all, Canada is still Flanders to their Homer Simpson. And when asked what country's visitors should be most closely questioned when entering the U.S., only six per cent named Canada. At the same time, citizens of both countries seem eager to collaborate if it means more safety. In the SES poll, 75 per cent of Canadians and 81 per cent of Americans said there should be "much closer" or "somewhat closer" co-operation on issues of border security.

So why the urgency in Congress to clamp down on America's northern border?

"In both countries politics sometimes trumps policy," Cellucci says, pointing to Canada's decision to nix missile defence. "There will inevitably be disagreements and disputes, but, bottom line, we're going to keep working together because it's in each of our national interests to do so. This is probably one of the most amazing relationships between two countries anywhere. That doesn't get press because it's not controversial, but it's the truth."

Dwight Mason echoes that. It's not terribly interesting to report that the Canada-U.S. relationship is ebbing and flowing, much as it has for the past hundred years. It's not very dramatic to report that the disputes are marginal and generally the result of bad diplomacy as opposed to bad policy. But that's the truth, dramatic or not, he says. "Conflict makes for great stories," he says. "And there *are* some conflicts. We don't always see eye to eye, and we shouldn't. But each one of these little disputes is like a flash of lightning illuminating the night." As for those who see a larger cultural rift forming? "I think that's largely nonsense."

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