

Font Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

The New York Review of Books

Oh, Canada!

Andrew Stark

JULY 19, 2018 ISSUE

Common Ground

by Justin Trudeau

HarperCollins, 343 pp., CAN\$19.99 (paper, 2014)

Canada's Odyssey: A Country Based on Incomplete Conquests

by Peter H. Russell

University of Toronto Press, 535 pp., \$39.95

Could It Happen Here?: Canada in the Age of Trump and Brexit

by Michael Adams

Simon and Schuster, 178 pp., \$24.00

Maximum Canada: Why 35 Million Canadians Are Not Enough

by Doug Saunders

Knopf Canada, 249 pp., \$20.95

A cover of *The Economist* in 2003 featured a moose—that universally recognized symbol of Canada—wearing sunglasses. Inside, the magazine extolled Canada's new sophistication: its openness, even then, to legalizing gay marriage and decriminalizing marijuana; its cosmopolitan cities (Toronto would soon become the most diverse metropolis in the world, with over half of its residents foreign-born); and its growing international cultural clout.

It was another thirteen years before Canada received such coverage again. In October 2016, shortly before Donald Trump's election, the iconography was reversed.

Instead of a symbol of Canada wearing an accessory identified with America, the cover featured a quintessential symbol of America—the Statue of Liberty—brandishing a hockey stick. The accompanying headline read “Liberty Moves North: Canada's Example to the World.”



Mark Blinch/Reuters

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau posing with airport staff as they await the first planeload of Syrian refugees, Toronto, December 11, 2015

The sunglasses-bedecked moose suggests that Canada had, in 2003, finally shed its fabled stodginess—V.S. Pritchett once jibed that Canadians drink tea as a stimulant, while the English consume it as a sedative. Thirteen years later, Canada, with its wholehearted embrace of multiculturalism and multilateralism, seemed to have become the destination for those seeking better opportunities.

There is much talk these days about the “Canadian example,” at least in certain quarters: Barack Obama hailed the country as a polestar for the democratic world. (Trump might loath it for the same reason.) How is it that Canada has avoided the xenophobia and isolationism that now trouble the US and European democracies? It’s not that Canada has no tradition of robust right-wing populist movements. The gun-supporting, science-questioning Reform Party became the official opposition to the governing Liberals in the 1990s. After it merged with the old Progressive Conservatives to form the Conservative Party, it held power under Prime Minister Stephen Harper from 2006 to 2015. The white working-class voters who form a large part of Trump’s base also form a considerable part of the Canadian electorate.

Yet polls show that 80 percent of Canadians value immigration. In fact, those Canadians who most strongly describe themselves as patriotic are also the most supportive of immigration and multiculturalism; in America the opposite is true. And approval of multiculturalism at home is matched by support for multilateralism abroad: a 2014 public-opinion analysis concluded that Canadians remain resolute “liberal internationalists”: believers in strong international institutions, especially the UN, and robust global governance regimes, particularly trade and environmental treaties.¹

No wonder that Bono, for instance, insists that “the world needs more Canada.” But does Canada, in its openness to multiculturalism and multilateralism, immigration and globalization, have anything to teach the world? It might seem just lucky to be shielded by its geographical location from the flows of migrants that roil American and European politics. “We have the luxury,” Canada’s immigration minister Ahmed Hussen admits, “of being surrounded by oceans on three sides, and then by the US border.” Its success, though, has a deeper basis as well: Canada’s longstanding regional rivalries and economic history have helped encourage support of immigration and global trade to a degree not seen in much of the developed world.

In the fall of 2014, as he was preparing to topple Stephen Harper and bring his Liberals to power, Justin Trudeau published *Common Ground* to give Canadians a sense of his life and thinking. The world knows Canada’s prime minister—the son of Pierre Trudeau, prime minister nearly uninterruptedly from 1968 to 1984—as a man who personally welcomed Syrian refugees with free winter coats at the Toronto airport while Trump was turning them away, and who charmed the Davos crowd that Trump left cold. He has boosted immigration levels and fought hard to preserve NAFTA. A charismatic forty-six-year-old snowboarder and boxer, Trudeau winsomely cuddles pandas and balances babies in the palm of his hand; he has appeared on the covers of *Rolling Stone* as well as a Marvel superhero comic book. He is the

coolest of Canadians, he *is* the moose sporting sunglasses. But what, exactly, is Trudeau's connection with the hockey stick in the crook of Liberty's arm—with the idea of Canada as a port in the storm of international right-wing populism?

Common Ground, like most campaign manifestos, refers repeatedly to its author's "vision" concerning his country. Yet as one reads the book, the word "vision" comes to resemble the harmonica in a Robert Klein comedy routine, which Klein repeatedly raises to his lips and then—just as you think he's about to play a few bars and show us what it sounds like—lowers again to start tapping his toes or snapping his fingers.

"My vision for this country," Trudeau writes, "is very much shaped by my experiences and the influences upon me." And what might that vision be? He doesn't say, moving on immediately to a meditation on his childhood. Or: "The audience...engaged...in a great discussion about our shared vision for our kids and our country." Terrific—could he say a little more about that vision? But no, he's now on to a description of the immigrant community in his parliamentary constituency.

Trudeau's vision, one starts to realize, is not *for* the country, but *of* it. It's the vision not of a leader, but of a lover. Nothing else can quite compare with what excites his ardor. Canada is "perhaps the only country on earth that is strong because of our differences, not despite them," he gushes. It's the world's "first post-national state." There is "no mainstream in Canada." These starry-eyed utterances diminish the way in which cultural differences strengthen many other countries. They also ignore the fact that Canadian employers often favor job applicants with Canadian work experience, educational credentials, and language skills over candidates with abundant skills and experience acquired in other countries, thus helping to perpetuate an economic, if not a cultural, mainstream that can be difficult for some immigrants to break into.

So it's not surprising that Trudeau believes, as he said in 2017, that "my role...is to...govern in such a way that [Canada would be] a positive example in the world." And yet in the same breath, he quietly cautions that it's not his place to "lecture another country on how they choose to govern themselves." We Canadians, the Vancouver writer George Woodcock once said, "pride ourselves on our ironic modesty." Trudeau clearly takes pride in Canada's shining beacon, and the fact that he holds it. But how, specifically, can other nations follow and perhaps join him? Modesty prevents him from saying.

And so we must look elsewhere. The political scientist Peter Russell, author of *Canada's Odyssey: A Country Based on Incomplete Conquests*, is known for his sensitive and searching work on Canada's indigenous communities, whom he aptly describes as possessing the joint status of colonies and nations. European settlers, Russell writes, colonized Canada's native peoples in every sense of that word. They stole their wealth, attempted to assimilate them, and broke down their social structures. They left a horrendous legacy that, to this day, includes Indian reserves without potable water and, since 1980, at least 1,100 murdered or missing Aboriginal women. Yet despite that long experience of colonization, Canada's indigenous

peoples also remain “nations” in every sense of the word: linguistically, ethnically, culturally, and (on reserves) territorially distinct. Canada’s failed attempts to assimilate its first nations, Russell argues, left Canadians with a rueful lesson in the value of difference and the plight of the persecuted: a lesson, he believes, that helps account for the country’s current openness to immigrants and refugees.

Brutally colonized but enduring as full-fledged nations, indigenous Canadians are one of the two “incomplete conquests” of Russell’s title. The other is Quebec, the second-largest of Canada’s ten provinces and the only one with a majority French-speaking population. Quebec too, as Russell says, constitutes its own linguistically and territorially distinct nation within Canada. Accordingly, its governments have over the years demanded special powers over immigration, culture, the judiciary, social policy, and foreign policy that would be denied to the other nine English-speaking provinces, and even, on a couple of occasions, attempted to secede from the country altogether. But unlike Canada’s indigenous communities, French-majority Quebec—a society that itself originated in European settlement—was never colonized by Canada’s English-speaking majority. Precisely because it ultimately accepted Quebec’s distinctiveness, Russell argues, “multinational, multicultural” Canada offers a shining “example of how diverse peoples can live together,” replacing “empire and nation-state as the most attractive model in the twenty-first century.”

But of course multinational, multicultural states have sometimes spawned xenophobic political movements. And so if we are asking why Canada remains uniquely open to immigration and globalization, we must look at a third phenomenon that qualifies as an incomplete conquest, although Russell does not describe it that way. It’s the relationship between Canada’s four western provinces—British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba—and its largest province, Ontario.

After Canada’s founding in 1867, in order to encourage the east–west trade between its provinces that would protect the fledgling nation against the economic influence of America, the Canadian government imposed tariffs on US-manufactured imports. The resource-heavy western provinces were henceforth compelled to sell their timber, fur, and minerals to the metropole of Ontario and then buy manufactured products back at tariff-protected high prices. Later, in 1980, Pierre Trudeau infuriated the west with the National Energy Program, which subsidized energy consumption in Ontario through taxes on western oil production.

Russell notes all of this. But what it means is that the Canadian west has long felt as if it’s treated as a colonial outpost by Ontario: as nothing more than a trove of resources to be exploited. In Ontario, the ritziest gathering places have imperial-sounding names like the Albany Club and the York Club; their equivalents in Alberta are the Petroleum Club and the Ranchmen’s Club. Yet as part of English-speaking Canada, the west, though feeling colonized, never became a distinct nation: it is a reverse image of Quebec, that nation that was never colonized.

If there is anywhere that right-wing populism of the kind plaguing American and European

politics could be expected to take hold in Canada, it is in the west. The right-wing component is certainly there. Western Canadians, legatees of the American ranchers and farmers who migrated north in the 1800s, are far more opposed to gun regulations or carbon taxes than Canadians elsewhere. The anti-elite, anti-expert component of populism is certainly there too. Criminologists who show that crime is down, or climatologists who warn of carbon emissions from Alberta's oil sands, are peremptorily rejected as out-of-touch eggheads by the right-wing political parties that have emerged from the west. "We're not governing on the basis of the latest statistics," Conservative justice minister Rob Nicholson said in 2011. "We're governing on the basis of what's right."

And yet Canada's right-wing populist politicians, storming as they did out of the western provinces, enthusiastically embraced both multiculturalism and globalization, since these turned out to be powerful tools for challenging Quebec and Ontario. Multicultural immigration, in western eyes, became a means of diluting Quebec's status as a distinct nation within Canada: if one could argue that Quebec's French Canadians were no different than Somali Canadians or Chinese Canadians or Greek Canadians in their possession of a distinct language, culture, and history, then, as Russell notes, that would undercut Quebec's claims to powers unavailable to western provinces.

Meanwhile, globalization appealed to westerners because it would liberate them from the consequences of what they saw as a century of "Ontario first" economic policy. The Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, the precursor of NAFTA negotiated by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in the late 1980s, dismantled the tariffs that had required westerners to pay higher prices for manufactured imports in order to protect Ontario industries.

NAFTA's rules also prohibit any future federal government from enacting its own version of Pierre Trudeau's National Energy

Program. And so Canada's right-wing populists, rooted in the west, supported NAFTA, since it drove down the price of goods. Even in Ontario the famous Ford brothers, the late Toronto mayor, Rob, and the province's new premier, Doug, have hewed to this Canadian model for right-wing populism. Though railing against taxes and social programs, and media and academic elites, they have remained staunchly pro-NAFTA and pro-immigration.

In his book, Trudeau deplores "resentment between provinces." But in a strange twist of fate, interprovincial resentment has turned out to be a profound blessing for Canada.

There are good political reasons, then, why Canada's right-wing populist parties have not



Kevork Djansezian/Getty Images

Spectators at the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, February 2010

supplied anti-immigration and anti-globalization options to their voters. But why haven't Canada's white non-college-educated voters demanded them? As Trudeau acknowledges, they face "all the pressures and anxieties that people are feeling around the world." A recent book by the social scientist Michael Adams helps explain why those voters take the positions they do.

To the question he posed in his title—*Could It Happen Here?: Canada in the Age of Trump and Brexit*—Adams gives a definitive no. In Canada, there exists no equivalent of Trump's white-nationalist electorate. Few Canadians view incarceration or expulsion as the most appropriate responses to immigration. Nor are there any significant numbers who deem domestic isolationism, or, in rarer instances, militia-protected enclaves to be the best protections against globalization. Incarceration, expulsion, isolation, and enclaves are all spatial solutions, suggesting a belief among American right-wingers that the answers to their country's problems lie in geographic separation and distancing. Adams, a prominent Canadian pollster, finds little evidence of such sentiment north of the border.

But there is a constituency in Canada that resembles Americans who live in "depressed coal-mining town[s]...in West Virginia," as Adams puts it, yet who have not turned to the extreme right. Although Adams doesn't say so, the anti-globalization and anti-immigration sentiments of such Americans can be better understood through the lens of time, not space. They spent many years working in mines and mills only to find the promised rewards—their livelihoods, their pensions, the possibility of passing their jobs down to their children—snatched from them by globalization. And while they have put in a great deal of time for no reward, they see immigrants as receiving rewards, in the form of American jobs and social services, without having put in the time to earn them.

In Adams's telling, the Canadian experience shows that smart policies can divert such voters from their anti-globalization and anti-immigration bias. In the 1950s, Canadian politicians recognized that if its federation was to survive, it would have to include a system for redistributing resources to the country's poorer regions. Only then could fishermen in Newfoundland, farmers in Saskatchewan, and miners in Quebec continue to earn a livelihood while staying in the far-flung regions where their families had for generations been rooted, instead of flooding to cities to look for work and incurring harsh psychological and economic costs. Canada's constitutionally enshrined "equalization" system, which ensures that each province has roughly the same fiscal capacity to provide government services, has helped working Canadians stay in their homes and supported communities in troubled economic times. So have a suite of federal agencies dedicated to developing Canada's poorer regions, along with the country's much-vaunted public health care system and its well-regulated banking sector, which avoided the American foreclosure crisis.

These policies all have their flaws. Equalization can discourage poorer provinces from growing their economies, since greater local wealth means they will receive less in equalization payments. Regional-development agencies, meanwhile, tend to channel money to businesses that otherwise could have relied on private lenders, using tax revenue that might

more profitably have been spent on health care and education. But they are part of what, as Adams says, underlies the saying that “the best way to achieve the American dream [is] to become a Canadian.” They have headed off the rage against globalization—against trade and climate agreements—that afflicts some American workers. For them, their third-generation jobs are woven into a broader cultural heritage—a way of life—that is entitled to a good chance of surviving, not simply positions that they should have to earn and re-earn every day in a ruthless labor market. Canadian policy has responded precisely to that kind of deep-seated belief.

Many Trump voters describe their jobs as a kind of cultural heritage, not as something they should have to keep earning. Yet while the voters quoted in recent dispatches from Trump country by Arlie Hochschild, Joan C. Williams, and others never speak of the importance of immigrants culturally assimilating, they do believe citizenship is something that immigrants must earn. What bothers these voters is their sense, however unfounded, that immigrants are enjoying the perks of citizenship without having put in the time necessary to go through the required legal hurdles in the case of the undocumented, or to acquire valuable skills to offer the US economy in the case of the documented. Instead, immigrants are admitted on unearned, line-jumping criteria such as their regional or familial origins. They slip across a porous border, or win country-specific lotteries, or take advantage of the fact that they have relatives in the US.²

Canada has astutely deflected comparable voters from their xenophobic temptations, according to the sociologist Irene Bloemraad. Motivated by its commitment to multicultural pluralism, Canada has long maintained a region-blind approach in deciding whom to admit, and it has reduced its family reunification program. Instead, she observes, Canada selects most of its immigrants on the basis of their labor-market qualifications: their education, training, linguistic abilities, and work experience. That Canada principally admits “people with skills that are thought to contribute to the economy” is, for Bloemraad, a major “reason for...Canadian exceptionalism,” and these might be anything from computer to caregiving skills, depending on what the economy needs. It’s why Canada, even though it has “by far the highest percentage of foreign-born residents” among transatlantic countries, has the lowest percentage of citizens who think immigration “represent[s] more of a problem than an opportunity.”³ And although there have been some fluctuations in recent opinion, the latest Gallup Global Migrant Acceptance Index confirms that Canada continues to embrace immigration more enthusiastically than either America or Europe (with the exception of Iceland).

With economic disparities between Canada’s regions rendered less relevant as criteria for inner migration, Canadians can make their job decisions based more on cultural and familial considerations. And with cultural and familial differences rendered less relevant as criteria for accepting immigrants, Canada chooses new citizens based more on economic considerations.

Even if Canada’s peculiar regional rivalries and economic policies cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world, though, the world can perhaps be transplanted to Canada. Some

have supported the idea of Canada's attaining a population of 100 million by 2100. With its current population of 36 million, Canada will have to markedly step up immigration if it is going to sustain its increasingly aging citizenry, as the journalist Doug Saunders argues in *Maximum Canada*.

Aging populations will, of course, burden other developed countries. But Canada has unique reasons for ramping up immigration. Some have to do with long-standing gripes among Canadian writers, actors, musicians, and other artists—now emigrated to the US—that the domestic market simply did not have the money or collaborative talent to support their ambitions. Saunders once asked the Toronto-born Frank Gehry why he hadn't stayed in Canada. Gehry replied that the country's creative class was simply too small to sustain daring architectural work. There are also future economic threats. If Canada fails to increase its population severalfold, its GNP will fail to rise accordingly, and it will lose its membership in the G-7 well before the turn of the next century.

Canada has the capacity to sustain a much larger population. As Saunders notes, even the 10 percent of the country's landmass near the US border, where 90 percent of Canadians live, could accommodate 400 million people before it would have the population density of today's Netherlands. A group of prominent Canadians has formed the "Century Initiative" to promote the "100 million by 2100" idea. And Immigration Minister Hussen has already said he intends to increase Canada's annual intake.

Saunders expresses no worry that the 100 million goal would require Canada to dilute its merit-based system, since "merit" is based on whatever the labor market requires at a given time. The most important thing is to continue making it relatively quick and uncomplicated for immigrants, whether health care aides or skilled tradespeople or engineering students, along with their close relatives, to attain permanent resident status. In this way they will gain an immediate stake in the country, and the country in them. So if all else fails, Canada's contribution to ameliorating the ravages of global xenophobia might simply be as a haven for those who want to flee it. After all, even the country's right-wing populists will welcome such newcomers with open arms.

1 Roland Paris, "Are Canadians Still Liberal Internationalists?," *International Journal*, Vol. 69 (2014). ↵

2 See Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New Press, 2016), and Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Harvard Business Review, 2017). ↵

3 Irene Bloemraad, "Understanding 'Canadian Exceptionalism' in Immigration and Pluralism Policy," Migration Policy Institute, July 2012. ↵