

Maple Leaf Rag

Does Canada matter?

Jeremy Lott

The Friendly Dictatorship, by Jeffrey Simpson,
Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 238 pages,
\$25.95

BY NOW, YOU may have forgotten about Joe, the flannel-clad twenty-something whose 30-second stump speech on behalf of all things Canadian delighted viewers in his native country. Joe's speech, delivered in an ad for Molson beer with a maple leaf flag in the background, was almost unavoidable in the spring of 2000:

"Hey, I am not a lumberjack or fur trader, and I don't live in an igloo or eat blubber or own a dog sled and I don't know Jimmy, Sally, or Suzie from Canada, although I am certain they're really, really nice. I have a prime minister, not a president; I speak English and French, not American; and I pronounce it 'about,' not 'aboot.' I can proudly sew my country's flag on my backpack. I believe in peacekeeping, not policing; diversity, not assimilation; and that the beaver is a truly proud and noble animal. A toque is a hat, a chesterfield is a couch, and it's pronounced *zed*, not *zee*, *zed*! Canada is the second largest landmass, and the first nation of hockey, and the best part of North America. My name is Joe, and I am Canadian! Thank you."

Audiences loved it. Beer sales shot up, Molson was besieged with requests for copies of the video short, and the *National Post* declared that Jeff Douglas, the Nova Scotian who played Joe, was a "national treasure." Having been on the ground at the time—in British Columbia—I can attest to the visceral impact of what

I at first thought was a joke. Joe quickly became an icon of that quirky thing known as Canadian nationalism. Heritage Minister Sheila Copps even aired his rant at the Congress for International Press Institute in Boston.

Interviewed in the Canadian edition of *Time*, Douglas maintained that, while he was paid to deliver the rant, he believed every word of it. The follow-up was priceless:

Time: "So you really believe the beaver is 'proud and noble'?"

Douglas: "There is a type of nobility about the animal...."

And then market forces set in. Hollywood took notice of Douglas and began to send the appropriate signals. Because of lower tax rates, a warmer climate, and more opportunities, many Canadians—especially young Canadians—with skills, money, or ambition tend to flow south at the drop of a hat. The brain drain has become so pervasive that the newsmagazine *Maclean's* recently ran a cover story featuring "fifty people who chose Canada."

Jeff Douglas was not among them. Over the objections of his fellow countrymen, many of whom—I am not making this up—petitioned the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board to make him stay, Douglas moved to Los Angeles in 2001. He then backed out of plans to return to star in an Edmonton production of *Romeo and Juliet*. He told *Time* that if Canadians were having a hard time making the adjustment, "they can keep Joe and let Jeff go. Joe will never leave Canada."

Douglas is hardly the only prominent Canadian to move south. (As I wrote this review, the Canadian-born come-

dian Jim Carrey applied for U.S. citizenship, telling the Associated Press that the United States "defined me.... This country allowed my dreams to come true.") But the Douglas story captures the Canadian predicament, and it does so in a way that *Globe and Mail* columnist Jeffrey Simpson's new book, *The Friendly Dictatorship*, ultimately fails to do. Canada is not just a nation in decline. There is a real question as to what even makes it a nation.

Although Canada is nominally Catholic (and Anglican), religion, official or otherwise, does not give Canadians a set of issues to argue over, as

Often, the only articulation of what defines a Canadian comes in the form of one loud, sustained negative statement: *We are not Americans!*

it does for Americans. Instead of promoting a common tongue, the government enforces a rigid policy of bilingualism. This is mocked with great aplomb in Michael Moore's movie *Canadian Bacon*, in which police officer Dan Aykroyd forces John Candy to rewrite anti-Canadian graffiti in French, then fines him "\$1,000 Canadian, or \$10 American, if you prefer." (Incidentally, both Aykroyd and Candy were born in Canada.)

The Canadian military is too small and ineffective to generate much centripetal force, having long since retreated behind America's good will, large military, and nuclear umbrella. Compare the American and Canadian militaries in the company of most Canadians, and they tend to fall back on the fact that the last

Sphere of Influence

Sputnik's lingering effects

Charles Paul Freund

WAS *SPUTNIK*, THAT beeping little beachball-sized sphere that so surprised the West in 1957, really "the shock of the century"? That might be a bit much, despite the subtitle hype of Paul Dickson's recent cultural history, *Sputnik: The Shock of the Century* (Walker & Co.). But a huge shock it surely was, and it's instructive, here in a quite different world—one still reverberating from the collapse of the World Trade Center towers—to recall both *Sputnik's* shock and *Sputnik's* consequences. They have something to teach us about the cultural reaction to catastrophe.

How big a deal was *Sputnik*? Pretty big. You remember how Orson Welles dies in the opening scene of *Citizen Kane*? How a snow globe drops from his hand as he sighs the famously confessional "Rosebud"? Well, when the last of the early baby boomers goes, it won't be surprising if he or she too sighs a revealing last recognition of childhood's end. Not "Beatles." Not "Nam." Not "Dealey Plaza."

"*Sputnik*." It mobilized boomers' minds and imaginations for political ends.

When the Soviets launched the first man-made satellite in October 1957—ahead of America's planned *Vanguard*—it didn't actually do anything but fly and emit its beeping signals. It couldn't see or hear anything. It wasn't a military threat. But just *being* up there, circling over everybody's head all day long (and at certain times visible to the naked Western eye), was enough to have major

consequences. The first such consequence was to lend credibility to the Soviets as more than a potential military or political threat. *Sputnik* gave them scientific credibility; it gave them a potential role in the future and thus made that future much more threatening (even assuming no nuclear exchanges) than it had seemed.

The other consequence had to do with the West's idea of itself. *Sputnik* turned the West into a community of guilt-ridden flagellants in much the way the Black Plague had affected medieval Europeans. What *Sputnik* demonstrated, supposedly, was that we were a soft, sinful, and stupid people. Dickson quotes a historian's jeremiad from 1962, charging that Americans "had been experiencing the world crisis from soft seats of comfort, debauched by [the] mass media... pandering for selfish profit to the lowest level of our easy appetites, fed full of toys and gewgaws, our power, our manpower softened in will and body in a climate of amusement."

We needed toughening in mind and spirit, such prophets raged. But what we needed most were more scientists. Rocket man (and ex-Nazi) Wernher von Braun called for a new kind of warrior, one armed with a slide rule. Enter the 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA), whose goal was to bring "American education to levels consistent with the needs of our society." Or, more plainly, to reshape American students to futures consistent with the national political agenda.

Sputnik found American education in a debate over ends. Many educators were calling for a return to memorization, drill, and "basics." The satellite redirected that debate; in its

wake, American schooling was to be about thinking "creatively," especially about science. That meant hastily assembling courses about the "New Math," courses that teachers themselves often didn't understand. It meant taking the brightest students and tracking them through advanced classes, almost always science classes.

This was a civic revolution. Pre-war American schools don't deserve romanticizing; they turned out plenty of ill-educated graduates and served many minority and poor students very badly. But they had a hidden virtue: They made few decisions about their (middle-class male) students that had lifelong consequences. This was in marked contrast to most of the world's miserable schools, which limited students' lives almost from the beginning by deciding what kind of life to prepare them for. The American approach didn't guarantee anything, but it removed an impediment that hobbled everyone else. The NDEA, in contrast, was an experiment in creating citizens the state wanted.

It didn't last long enough to succeed or fail. The U.S. space program soon asserted itself; the Soviets are gone. School tracking systems were assailed as elitist; educators are again arguing over ends.

Not that *Sputnik* didn't leave its mark. Indirectly, the Internet is one. A permanent federal role in education is another. So is the template of federal rescue in the shadow of threat. And so are the fading memories of those one-time students who were made to trade their Slinkys for slide rules and who were taught, briefly, citizenship in set theory. ■

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