



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

**What Foreign Diplomats
Need to Know about Canada:
Personal Reflections**

by Colin Robertson
October 2020

POLICY PERSPECTIVE

WHAT FOREIGN DIPLOMATS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT CANADA: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

by Colin Robertson

CGAI Vice-President & Fellow
October 2020



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Originally written for the annual orientation program for newly arrived diplomats put on by the Carleton University [Initiative](#) for Parliamentary and Diplomatic Engagement it has been revised in response to readers' feedback. A consolidation of notes used in response to requests from foreign diplomats for a briefing on Canada, it is a personal reflection, drawing on my travels across every province and territory, as well as my diplomatic experience, much of which involved working with our provincial governments. One of my assignments also involved leading [Historica Canada](#), dedicated to building awareness of Canadian history and citizenship.

Canadians are a generally socially progressive but economically prudent people living in a cold climate. Our vast and formidable geography and harsh weather breeds resilience and perseverance against the elements. Hockey is our national sport and we think of ourselves as a northern nation, even if most of us live within 200 miles of the U.S. border. Practical issues like transportation and communications matter to us. Our diversity as a people and as a place to live obliges us to practise tolerance, accommodation and compromise. We try to govern by consent.

We must trade to ensure our prosperity, and trade requires peace and stability. For a middle power like Canada to have impact, a rules-based order is essential. We are, by nature and habit, multilateralists. We enjoy membership in just about every multilateral organization going, notably the G7 and the G20; the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD); the United Nations (UN) and its alphabet soup of agencies; the Commonwealth and la Francophonie; the World Trade Organization (WTO); the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); the Canada-U.S.-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA); Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA); the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Pacific Alliance, among others.

By necessity, we must be innovative and practical. Canadian [inventions](#) include basketball (Go Raptors), the paint roller, the garbage bag, peanut butter, insulin, Pablum and the WonderBra. Yet, we are not as entrepreneurial or as good at marketing as our U.S. neighbours.

We are patriotic, especially when our men's or women's national teams are playing hockey. The economic and cultural pull tends to be north-south, toward the U.S., rather than east-west, across Canada. This creates a certain insecurity that is accentuated by regionalism. Reflecting that insecurity, for too long, English Canadians would define themselves as "not Americans". As one humourist put it "Canada could have enjoyed English government, French culture and American know-how. Instead it ended up with English know-how, French government and American culture."

We are officially bilingual – English and French – but proficiency beyond the public service and parts of Montreal and New Brunswick is nowhere near European standards. Fifty years after former prime minister Pierre Trudeau implemented bilingualism, the percentage of Canadians claiming proficiency in both languages has only risen from [12 to 17 per cent](#). It is not as though our schools have not tried. French immersion is usually the preferred program in English Canada for the middle and upper classes.



Proud of its diversity, this vast country is distinguished by its regions. To truly understand Canada, Ottawa-based envoys need to travel to the provinces to meet our premiers and the mayors of our major cities. While the national (or federal) government sets the framework for trade and investment, it is the premiers and the mayors who are closest to the reality of business. Just as all politics is local, so is business.

By temperament, we are helpful fixers and bridge-builders. This usually makes us good at diplomacy, as long as we do not take ourselves too seriously or succumb to preachiness. We rate high on likeability and as a desirable place to live. There is broad support for our education system and public health care. COVID has only underlined the value of a publicly funded universal health system – in contrast to the U.S. approach. Unlike our southern neighbour, we

also have no visceral allergy to taxation to pay for these public goods. But while our social safety net and public education system compare favourably when contrasted against those of the U.S., we know little about how the services other governments offer their citizens compare to ours.

We do integration well, but we still have remedial work when it comes to treatment of and reconciliation with our Indigenous peoples: the Inuit, Metis and [634 First Nations](#) speaking more than 50 languages. Recent events in the U.S. have revitalized the Black Lives Matter movement and this has echoed around the world, including in Canada by putting the spotlight on the disadvantaged: First Nations as well as visible minorities and the LGBTQ.

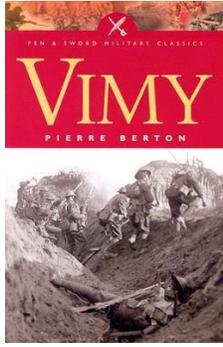


Colony to Nation

Canada. The name comes from the Huron-Iroquoian word [kanata](#), meaning a village or settlement. Jacques Cartier sailed up the “rivière du Canada” – the St. Lawrence River – in 1534 to claim the land for France. Samuel de Champlain would later use both Canada and New France to refer to the French colony. But Canada stuck.

Canada came into its own after the British defeated the French (1759-1763) and the division (1791) into Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec). The British North America Act (1867) created “[One Dominion under the name of Canada](#)”. It would be another 100 years before we got our [maple leaf](#) flag (1965) and our anthem, ‘O Canada’, only received legislative approval in [1980](#). We still [fiddle](#) with the words.

At various times, the Vikings, the French and the British colonized us. The Spanish had temporary fishing camps. The Americans invaded us during their Revolution and during the War of 1812. American “manifest destiny” included Canada. There were [Fenian raids](#) across the border after the American Civil War.



If we are not war-like, we certainly bred warriors. Canada came of age during the First World War, and the Vimy Ridge Memorial is a tribute to the [61,000](#) who died during that conflict. During the final two years the Canadians never lost a battle. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George called them the ‘[shock troops](#)’ of the Empire and they are immortalized in a splendid volume that is part of military historian Tim Cook’s accounts of Canada at war. During the Second World War, if the U.S. was the arsenal of democracy, Canada was the aerodrome, with its extensive Commonwealth air training program. Canadians helped win the Battle of the Atlantic. By war’s end, the Royal Canadian Navy had [more vessels than it had officers](#) when the war began, making it one of the world’s largest fleets.

Our three oceans give Canada the world’s [longest coastline](#) and, currently, we need more navy and coast guard capabilities. An ambitious [shipbuilding initiative](#) with three of our shipyards is underway to both refit and launch a new vessel every year for the next 20 years. This will give Canada a new fleet of warships and patrol ships. After much delay, a similar exercise is underway to provide the Royal Canadian Air Force with [88 new fighter jets](#).



The Constitution

We are the “[peaceable kingdom](#)”, a confederation of 10 provinces and three territories that began in 1867, with the union of what are now Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, and continuing through to the creation of Nunavut in 1999. Jurisdiction over responsibility for trade (shared), immigration (shared), education (provincial), natural resources (provincial), and defence and foreign policy (federal) is divided between the national and provincial governments and set out in the Constitution with the judiciary – usually the Supreme Court – arbitrating on differences.

A key feature of the federation, embedded in the Constitution, is [equalization](#), “the principle of making equalization payments to ensure that provincial governments have sufficient revenues to provide

reasonably comparable levels of public services and reasonably comparable levels of taxation.” The transfers from rich to poor and the formula and criteria that determines these transfer amounts is inevitably controversial.

Queen Elizabeth II is our hereditary monarch. We have had a monarch as head of state since Cartier claimed Canada for France in [1534](#). We exchanged the French monarchy for the British after the Treaty of Paris in 1763. In the old parliamentary restaurant in Centre Block (now under renovation), there hung portraits of all Canada’s monarchs from François I to Queen Elizabeth II. Our longest reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, was the first to be crowned as Queen of Canada when she succeeded to the throne in [1953](#), yet another step in Canadian independence.

Our national government aims to provide “[peace, order and good government](#)”, as the Constitution requires. Once a parliamentary democracy, we became a constitutional democracy



with the patriation of our Constitution and adoption of the [Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#) in 1982, thereby subjecting the will of [Parliament](#) and the [legislatures](#) to judicial scrutiny.

We like to contrast this approach to the “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” celebrated by the U.S. Indeed, we like to contrast ourselves to the U.S. whenever we can, even if to outsiders we look and sound a lot like our American neighbours, eh!



The Great White North

Canadians think of themselves as a northern people. The North is our frontier. Hockey is the national game, and the country goes into a funk if our Olympic teams – men and women – do not make the finals. There is great frustration that the last time a Canadian team won the Stanley Cup was in 1993 (by the Montreal Canadiens, once the most winning team in sports). When the important games are played, the nation is glued to its screens.

But our attachment to the North is romantic rather than real. Canada is urban and we live in the southern part of Canada. Few Canadians have actually travelled to our Far North. Tourism is limited and expensive. But if you get the opportunity, take it. Many ambassadors consider the tour of the North organized every two years by Global Affairs the highlight of their Canadian posting.

While successive governments have all paid lip service to northern development, the reality is that there is not much to show for all the talk and our Arctic [framework strategy](#) is derisory when compared to other Arctic Council members, as well as the Chinese. The U.S. regularly reminds us that if we claim sovereignty in the Arctic, we should exercise it. Former prime minister Stephen Harper went north every summer to participate in the annual [Operation Nanook](#) military exercise.

Northern and Indigenous youth are the most prone to disease (tuberculosis and diabetes), alcohol and drug addiction, and suicide. Whether government policies toward Indigenous women constitute genocide is now a subject for debate following the release of *Reclaiming Power and Place: [The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#)*.



We take pride in our Mounties – the common name given to members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) – although we are embarrassed by their past behaviour toward women members and their handling of a recent mass shooting in Nova Scotia has led to a [public inquiry](#). We also take pride in our mountains, maple trees and maple syrup, and our beavers, polar bears, moose and loons.



O Canada

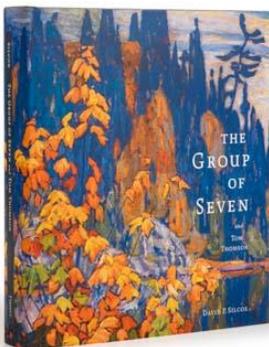
What is a Canadian? A bit bilingual, but certainly multicultural. Unlike the American melting pot, Canadians are more of a kilt. Over [200 ethnic groups](#) make up the Canadian mosaic, giving us different accents, as well as regional, ethnic and cultural variations.

While we constantly debate our national identity, we do have a distinctive culture.



One way to experience this is to walk through the new Canadian and Indigenous [Galleries](#) in the splendid National Gallery of Canada, designed by Canadian architects Moshe Safdie and Cornelia Oberlander. The Canada collection is world class. There are also the Canadian history galleries in the equally stunning Douglas Cardinal-designed Canadian Museum of History across the river. The three-part Canadian [history galleries](#) – early, colonial, modern - may be politically correct, but it is not an improvement on the original galleries that were lively and regionally experiential. The children’s gallery is always popular, and the Grand Hall’s totem poles and Pacific coast Indigenous village constitute a spectacular and popular venue for national day celebrations.

We’ve other museums in the National Capital region: the splendid War Museum, the Aviation and Space Museum, Agriculture and Food, the Museum of Nature and the Museum of Science and Technology. There are also two superb national museums outside the Ottawa region: the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in Halifax and the Canadian Museum for Human Rights at the Forks in Winnipeg.



Our iconic national artists are the Group of Seven. They are found in our national and provincial galleries, and a visit to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection along the Humber River in Vaughan, Ontario, is well worth it. But there is more: the photography of the Karsh brothers; the sculptures of Bill Reid and Joe Fafard; and paintings by Jean-Paul Riopelle, Jack Bush, William Kurelek and Emily Carr.

Literary greats range from authors such as Susanna Moodie, Stephen Leacock, Robertson Davies, Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro, to popular historians such as Pierre Berton and Charlotte Gray. Almost all of them incorporate the North in their stories.

Canadians love music. At the foundation of it all are English language poet troubadours in the tradition of Leonard Cohen, Ian & Sylvia, Gordon Lightfoot, Neil Young and Joni Mitchell, and



French Canadian chansonniers Robert Charlebois, Monique Leyrac, Gilles Vigneault, Félix Leclerc, Jean-Pierre Ferland, Angèle Arsenault, Ginette Reno, Harmonium, Beau Dommage, Édith Butler, Éric Lapointe, Kevin Parent, Isabelle Boulay, Daniel Lavoie, les Cowboys fringants, Marie Mai.

We have classical icons like Maureen Forrester, Glenn Gould, and Yannik Nezet-Seguin; jazz artists like Oscar Peterson and Diana Krall; and crooners like Paul Anka, Michael Bubl , Rufus Wainwright and k.d.lang. We also have Oscar winning composers including Howard Shore and Mychael Danna; world-renowned producers David Foster and Daniel Lanois; and rock stars including Bryan Adams, Corey Hart, Feist, the Guess Who, Tragically Hip, Arcade Fire, Blue Rodeo, Cowboy Junkies and prog-rock giants Rush. Country and western has long had an attachment for Canadians from Nova Scotia's own Hank Snow, to Don Messer's Jubilee, Anne Murray and superstar Shania Twain. Then there are the pop stars like Celine Dion, Justin Bieber and Shawn Mendes; R&B/Hip artists Drake and the Weekend, Bachman Turner Overdrive (Randy Bachman's *Vinyl Tap* plays on CBC radio every Saturday night), and indigenous artists Buffy Sainte-Marie, Tanya Tagaq and Susan Aglukark.

The Quebec cultural scene is particularly rich in talent and imagination whether on canvas or paper as well as on stage, screen and digital media as exemplified by artists including Michel Tremblay, Marie-Claire Blais, Robert Charlebois, Hubert Lenoir, Robert Lepage, Louis Lortie, Ang le Dubeau, les Violons du Roy, and Denys Arcand whose *Les Invasions barbares (2004)* won Canada's only foreign language film Oscar. The global giant Le Cirque de Soleil originated in Montreal where it has its school. For an insight into what Quebecois and Quebec think watch Radio Canada's [Tout le Monde en Parle](#) on Sunday nights.

Arguably, our success is partly the result of government regulations that require a percentage of Canadian content to be broadcast, which gives vital exposure to new artists, and financial support that subsidizes their recorded and live music-making. Watch the Junos, our annual awards for Canadian music artists, or attend the East Coast Music Awards or Breakout West, to see new talent. If you are in Calgary, visit the Canadian Music Centre to experience the breadth and depth of our national music making and see one of the most important keyboard instrument collections in the world. The Governor General's Performing Arts Awards, an annual gala affair at our recently renovated National Arts Centre, is an evening celebrating Canadian cultural excellence.

My favourite poet is Robert Service – the Kipling of Canada – and you have to start with his *Cremation of Sam McGee* and *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. Other notable poets include Al Purdy, Bliss Carman, Irving Layton and F.R. Scott.

Canadians have to have a sense of humour. Living in the Great White North, with Uncle Sam as our next-door neighbour, requires an appreciation for the comic and the capacity to laugh at ourselves as [This Hour Has 22 Minutes](#) does each week on CBC. Stephen Leacock's sketches of small-town life in the first part of the 20th century are still worth reading. Most of our humourists find a place on the stage or screen. They include Dan Aykroyd, Jim Carrey, Mike Myers, Martin Short, Gilda Radner, Eugene Levy, John Candy, Catherine O'Hara and David Steinberg. And watch this sketch of the [McKenzie Brothers](#) on SCTV for an insight into our cultural identity.

In most countries, it would be inconceivable for a national police force to be a revered national symbol, but the Mounties evoke our nation-building myth.



A Compromise with Geography, Climate and Diversity

The structural challenges in Canada are geography and climate – huge, cold and difficult. As a result, we put a premium on communications and transportation to keep the country together but even still the sensibilities in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and Calgary – our biggest cities – are different. But, as a former U.S. ambassador once remarked, the national temperament goes from A to Z in the U.S., but only from F to M in Canada. We compromise because we have had to deal with the land, our weather and the diversity in our peoples.

Our Fathers of Confederation purposely created a decentralized federation – the provinces control their resources and administer health care and education. You have to get out of Ottawa to appreciate the land and the people. You need to get to know the premiers. They recognize the importance of international trade and economics, more so than their national brethren.

Canada is a geographically big country spanning 5 1/2 time zones (Newfoundland, Atlantic, Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific); Saskatchewan does not use Daylight Saving Time. Second only to Russia in size, Germany would fit into Alberta while neighbouring Saskatchewan could take in the UK and Ireland. It takes longer to fly to the North Pole from Toronto than to the Equator. With 35 million people, we are the world's 37th most populated country, falling between Uganda and Iraq.

In terms of GDP, while we enjoy a place in the G7 thanks to the U.S., we rank 11th behind Brazil, Italy, India and Russia. We were instrumental in creating the G20. Protected by the U.S. defence shield, we spend just over one per cent of our GDP on defence, which is only half of what the U.S. wants from us and other NATO allies.

Canada is one of the most diverse nations. There is no majority group, although the [30 per cent](#) claiming descent from the United Kingdom – Scots, Irish, English and Welsh – are the largest group. France follows with 19 per cent, and then Germany. But since 1980, the majority of our new immigrants have come from Asia. Eighty per cent of us live in cities, and those cities are almost all located within a couple of hundred miles of the U.S. border.



The Economist

Settling Canada

We are good at integrating newcomers. We are still nation-building, and we resettle with little resistance some 300,000-plus immigrants and refugees every year, a number equivalent to almost one per cent of our population.

To some extent, Canada was settled by the dispossessed. The Indigenous First Nations lost land first to the short-staying Vikings, and then to French and English colonization. After the French were defeated at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759, the ruling elite went back to France, while the “habitants” stayed. Having lost the other 13 colonies to the American revolutionaries in 1783, the British had learned something about compromise. So they guaranteed French language rights, as well as the preservation of the civil code and religious freedom for the predominately Catholic French-Canadians.

The American War of Independence also brought the next wave of settlers. The losing British Loyalists fled north and more than doubled the soon-to-be Canadian population in the process, settling along the St. Lawrence in Ontario and Quebec, as well as in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

Then came the poorest from the British Isles – Scots displaced by foreclosure and Irish fleeing famine. Canada was the cheapest fare for those who could not afford Boston or New York, so they came to Quebec, Montreal or Halifax. Grosse Isle on the St. Lawrence, upriver from Quebec City,



is the largest graveyard outside of Ireland for those thousands who fled the 1840s Great Famine and died of typhoid and other diseases.

We built our national railway with Chinese (whom we then sent home) and Scots-Irish immigrants. We settled the West with “[stalwart peasants](#)” in sheepskin coats with large families from Eastern Europe, including Ukrainians, Germans, Poles and Russians. Those who claim Ukrainian descent form 3.9 per cent of the population, which explains our continuing interest in Ukraine. By comparison, our Indigenous population stands [at four per cent](#).

But open migration only went so far. We once applied a head tax on Chinese migrants and discouraged Asian migration until the mid 20th century. Today, Asian migrants – Chinese, Indians, Filipinos – make up almost half of our annual intake. And they integrate themselves well into Canadian society. There were [more Sikhs](#) in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s original cabinet than in its Indian counterpart.

After both world wars, we welcomed many from Eastern and Southern Europe, including Italians and Greeks, as well as Jews and other displaced persons. Poles, Hungarians and Czechs followed after their failed insurrections. Later came Ismaili Asians who had been thrown out of Idi Amin’s Uganda, over [100,000](#) Vietnamese boat people, and then refugees from Chile and Central America, Haiti, and more recently Somalia, the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Trudeau promised a home to 25,000 Syrians during the 2015 election. Canada has since taken in more than 60,000, many of them under private sponsorship from communities, churches and other groups. Refugees arriving via private sponsorship integrate more quickly because of the sponsors’ personal involvement.

The Aga Khan looked over the world and established his Centre for Pluralism in Canada. And we have to make pluralism work. Half the population of Toronto was born outside of Canada and Vancouver, Calgary and Montreal have populations with about 40 per cent born outside of Canada.





CANADA IS A SIGNIFICANT PRODUCER OF CRITICAL MINERALS WITH POTENTIAL FOR MANY OTHERS

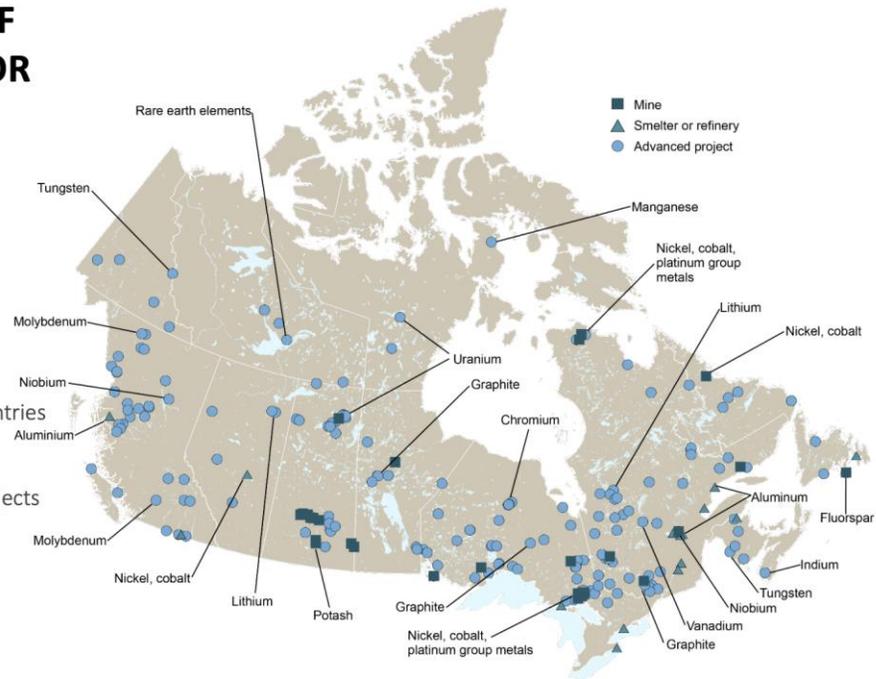


\$72 BILLION IN INVESTMENT**
is poised to transform Canada's mining sector



108 MAJOR PROJECTS**
have been announced or are under construction in Canada's mining sector

- ✓ Rare earths: 16 advanced projects and potentially 1 of the top 5 countries in the world
- ✓ Cobalt and nickel: world leading producer and 70 advanced stage projects
- ✓ Graphite: 4th in global production and 14 advanced stage projects
- ✓ Lithium: 17 advanced and near production stage projects
- ✓ Potash: World's leading supplier and largest reserves



Overview of critical mineral projects, 2019, NRCan

©Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, as represented by the Government of Canada, 2019

Resources: “Quelques arpents de neige”

Our natural resources are our national patrimony, vital to our economy and our inheritance to the next generation. The French philosopher Voltaire dismissed Canada as “quelques arpents de neige” – a few acres of snow. In the horse-trading of the colonial war, France chose Martinique and Guadeloupe for their sugar over Canada's fur and fish.

Using our resources well and conserving them matters to Canadians. Take energy, worth about [11 per cent](#) of our GDP. Canada is the [sixth largest](#) energy producer, the fifth largest net exporter and the eighth largest consumer.

Or our agrifood industry. Canada is the [fifth largest](#) agricultural exporter in the world. Canada is the world's number one producer and exporter of fresh and frozen wild blueberries. There are enough apples produced in Canada for every Canadian to consume 10 kilograms per year - almost [100 apples](#) per person.

Canada is the world's [largest producer](#) and exporter of lentils and peas, and the world's largest producer of high-protein milling wheat. Canada is also the number one canola-producing and exporting country in the world. Canola oil is used for salad dressing, marinades, margarine, biofuel, printer ink, adhesives and cosmetics. Canada exports approximately 90 per cent of its canola as seed, oil or meal to over 50 markets around the world. Canola seeds are crushed to create meal ([56 per cent](#)) and oil (44 per cent). Meal is used for high-protein livestock feed.

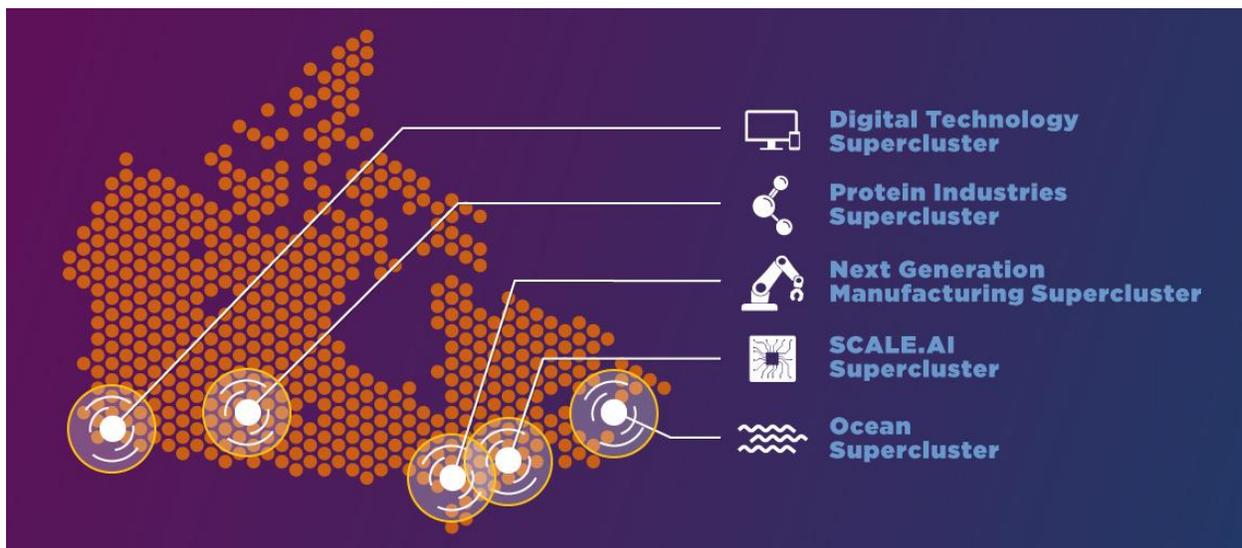
Where's the beef? In 2018, Canada produced 1.3 million tonnes of beef and veal, and is the [fifth largest](#) global exporter of beef and cattle. And it takes 29 per cent fewer cattle in the breeding herd and 24 per cent less land to produce the same amount of beef in [2011 compared to 1981](#). As the world's [third largest](#) pork exporter, Canada exports to more than 90 countries.

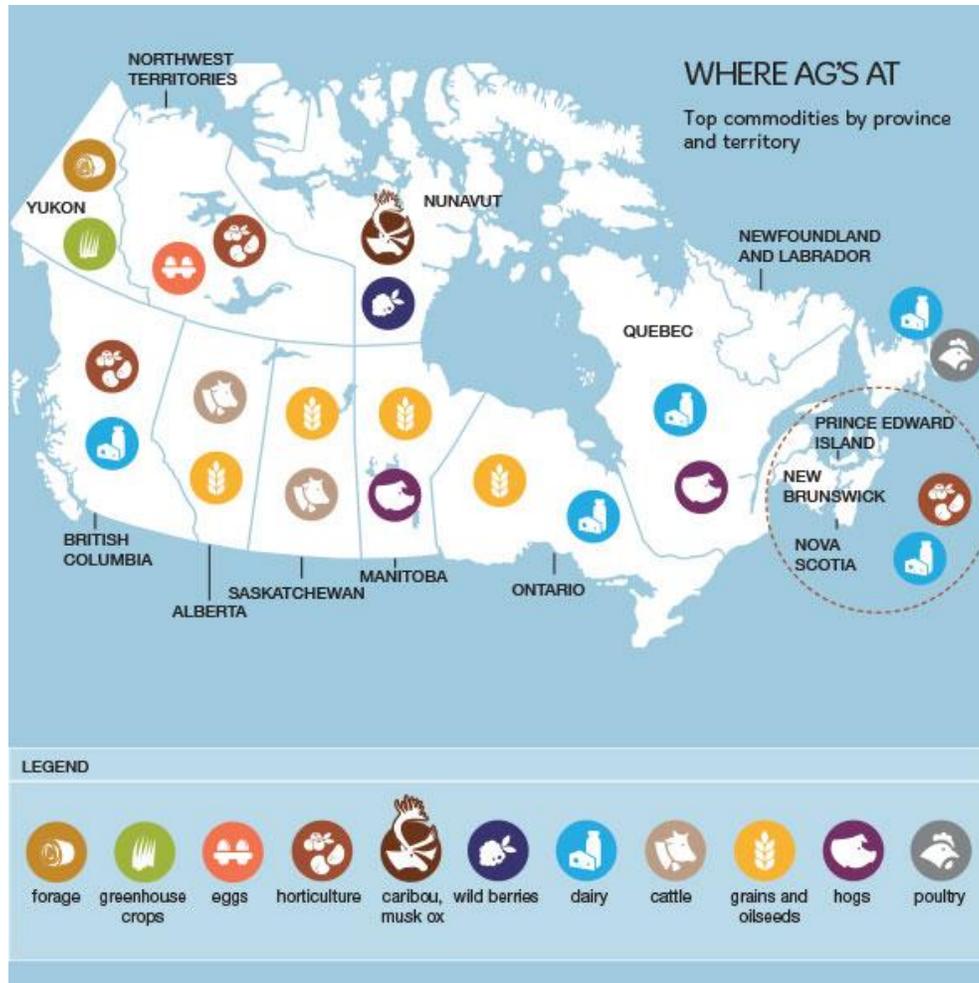


But the distribution is unequal. Overlay politics and the original design of Confederation and you have the resource politics of the country laid out. Overlay population and you have the power balances and power conflicts within Canada.

Our fisheries are located off our coasts. The cod fishery in the Atlantic that sustained us for centuries is still recovering from over-fishing.

Hydro is significant in four provinces. Oil is mostly in Alberta and Saskatchewan, with natural gas also there and in British Columbia, offshore Newfoundland, in the Far North, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec and Manitoba. Coal is abundant in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario. The Prairie Provinces, our traditional breadbasket, now produce as much pulse and lentils for overseas markets as wheat and barley, and our canola has become a major export crop.





A Trading Nation but Not Yet a Nation of Traders

We must trade to ensure prosperity, but, while we are a trading nation, we still do not have free trade within Canada. This is the [unfinished business](#) of Confederation. Nor are we yet a nation of global corporations. Whenever we develop any, they seem either to run into financial or product trouble – SNC Lavalin and Bombardier – or get taken over – Nortel, BlackBerry, Inco, Falconbridge and Barrick.

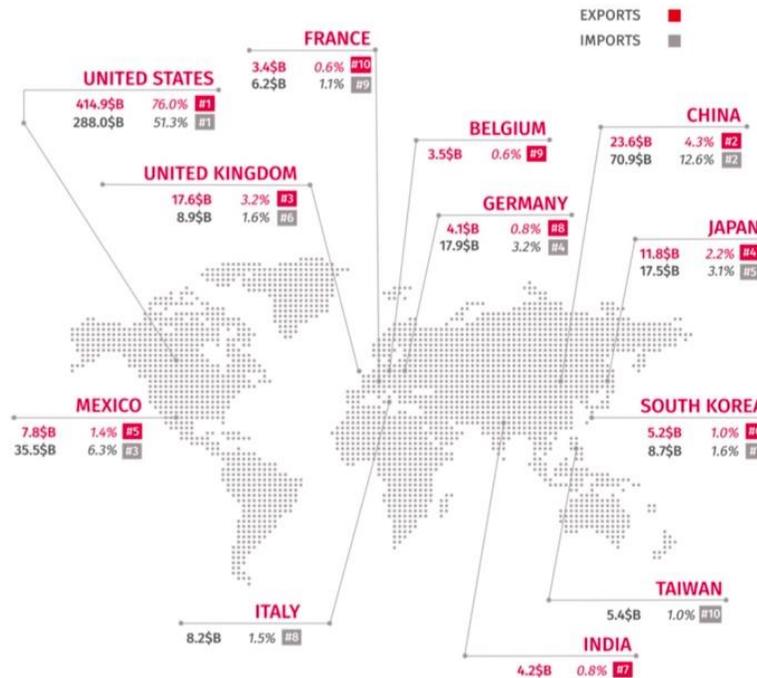
Our relative competitiveness is declining, despite government efforts, including the creating of [superclusters](#). The sense that we go for bronze when we should go for gold is a source of concern especially when it comes to government procurement, regulatory overload and our overall tax burden as identified in the [annual reports](#) of the World Economic Forum. It's the subject of recent focus by our leading business associations, the [Business Council of Canada](#) and Canadian [Chamber of Commerce](#) and the [Public Policy Forum](#).

The U.S. is our biggest market and the renegotiation of the NAFTA – now called CUSMA or USMCA – has reestablished the terms of continental trade. This dependence comes at a price, especially for our oil and gas which are both sold at a discounted price. We need to diversify our

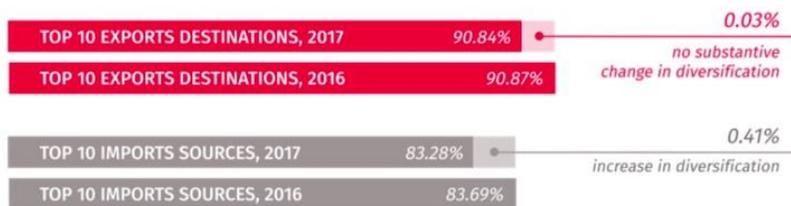


trade and increase the number of Canadian companies that export. We need to make better use of the people-to-people relationships. Our active, global immigration adds about one per cent to our population each year and this adds to our people-to-people ties.

CANADA'S TOP MERCHANDISE TRADE PARTNERS, 2017



CANADA'S TRADE DIVERSIFICATION, 2017



National Unity

Concern over Quebec's separation from Canada has been a permanent feature of Canadian history since we were a British colony. The conscription crises in both world wars divided French and English Canada. Violence flared during the 1960s, most notably with the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) and the 1970 October Crisis, the latter being considered either Pierre Trudeau's finest hour or a black moment for civil liberties.

The election of the Parti Quebecois in 1976 and the adoption of French language-only laws in Quebec pushed the separatist movement from terrorism to a democratic party that governed from the left. There were two referendums on Quebec separation – in 1980 and 1995. During the 1990s,



the federal Bloc Québécois went to Ottawa with official party status (including a stint as Official Opposition from 1993 to 1997 while the right was divided).

For now, Quebec separatism is quiescent. Pierre Trudeau thought immigration would take care of it but, aside from Montreal, most immigrants settle outside of Quebec. After the Second World War, Quebec accounted for almost 1/3 of the Canadian population, but today it is closer to 1/5.

Power and population have moved west. Toronto is now our premier city. Calgary has more head offices than Montreal. The last census gave 15 new parliamentary seats to Ontario, six each to B.C. and Alberta and only three to Quebec.

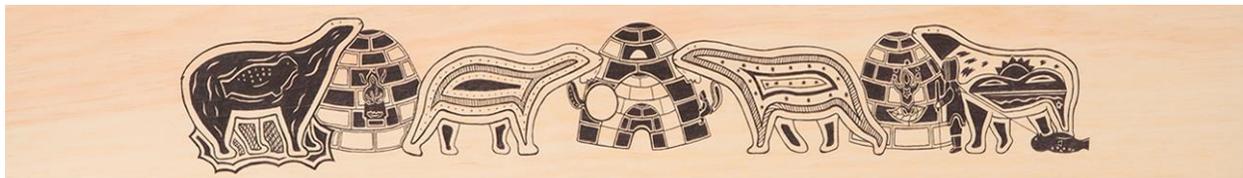
The rumblings on the national unity front now also come from the West, especially oil-rich Alberta, with its discontent over resource policy and climate policies.

Canadian populism was initially farmer- and worker-based, with their intellectuals drawing from the U.S. and U.K. experiences (and in Quebec from France). In recent years, populist discontent generated both the left-wing NDP (and its predecessor, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation party) and, on the right, the current Conservative Party. The latter was born out of the Reform and then Canadian Alliance parties, in reaction to the more centrist Progressive Conservative Party of former prime minister Brian Mulroney.

As provinces asserted their constitutional powers after the Second World War, differences would be addressed at meetings of the first ministers – the prime minister in the chair with the premiers and sometimes First Nations leaders.

These conferences became a feature of Canadian federalism, especially in the years before and after the 1982 patriation of the Constitution from the U.K. and subsequent efforts at constitutional reform, known as Meech Lake and Charlottetown. After initial meetings, both Harper and Trudeau have preferred to deal with premiers one-on-one rather than as a collective.

For their part, the premiers meet annually in the [Council of the Federation](#) to look at shared interests. Indigenous leaders also have their own forum (Assembly of First Nations). This usually involves pressing the federal government for more money and powers.



The U.S.A. ...

The U.S. is more than a country, it is a civilization. For John Meisel, who chaired the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), Canadian culture is the minority culture, at last in English Canada. Arguably American influence is greater in Canada than any other country or as Pierre Trudeau once observed: “Living next to you is in some ways like [sleeping with an elephant](#). No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.” Margaret Atwood put it this way: “If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia” mostly about our southern neighbour.



We were the 14th colony in British North America and the U.S. [Articles of Confederation](#) provide for Canada’s accession to the Union. From the American Revolution until the turn of the 20th century, there was always a fear that the U.S. would absorb Canada, either through manifest destiny or by invasion, as occurred during the U.S. War of Independence, the War of 1812 when the U.S. troops burned York (now Toronto), and then after the Civil War when Fenians made unsuccessful incursions.

Prime ministers have three permanent files on their desks: ensuring the nation’s political and economic security; preserving national unity; and managing the U.S. relationship. Our relationship with the U.S. is always tricky, but the one relationship that a prime minister has to get right is that with the president of the United States. Donald Trump, with his penchant for tweets and tariffs, presents a special challenge.

Protected first by Britain and the Royal Navy, since 1938 we have a series of understandings and formal alliances with the U.S., including the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD), the Five Eyes, NATO and NORAD.

Keeping up with the neighbours

2019 or latest

	Canada	United States
Population	37m	329m
GDP	\$2trn	\$21trn
Life expectancy	82 years	79 years
Share of foreign-born population, % of total	22%	14%
Gun homicides per 100,000 people	0.7	12
Happiness ranking (out of 156 countries)	9	19
Competitiveness ranking (out of 140 countries)	12	1
Trust in government, % of informed public	61%	33%
Maple syrup production, gallons	13m	4m

Sources: National statistics; United Nations; World Economic Forum; Edelman

The Economist

In terms of foreign policy, for Canada it is “America First” – in trade, security and people-to-people relations. Pre-pandemic, more than 400,000 people cross in both directions over the border daily. We trade nearly \$2 million a minute with the U.S. The U.S. takes 74 per cent of Canada’s exports (we provide about 18 per cent of U.S. imports) and provides 64 per cent of our imports. Despite what President Trump says, the U.S. enjoys a positive balance of trade with Canada on the back of its services. Americans hold nearly half the stock of foreign investment in Canada. The renegotiation of the NAFTA (1994) and implementation (July 2020) of the Canada-U.S.-Mexico agreement (CUSMA or USMCA) restores investor confidence and enables the potential for an enhanced North American manufacturing platform with continental supply chains, especially post-COVID and the requirement for security of supply and redundancy in sourcing.

Canadians too often define themselves by what we are not – ‘Americans’ even though we occupy the upper half of the North American condominium that we share with the U.S. and Mexico. This attitude reflects the natural insecurity of living next to the U.S. Mexicans share a similar insecurity and with greater reason – the U.S. absorbed 1/3 of Mexico’s original territory while Canada only lost bits and pieces along the Alaska panhandle, the lower mainland of British Columbia, and between Maine and New Brunswick.

Periodically, this leads to an identity crisis that afflicts and engages our cultural elite, especially in English Canada. French Canada takes comfort in the shield of its language and distinct culture. Ironically, the mark of making it in Canada is usually having made it in the U.S. This is especially true for our film, television and music stars, from Anka to Dion, Bubl  and Justin Bieber, and, of course, Drake.

The relationship with the U.S. will always be complicated. "The Americans are our best friends whether we [like it or not](#)" former Social Credit Leader Bob Thompson once [told](#) the House of Commons, to which former Ambassador Derek Burney added the caveat that “Canadians are Americans best friend, whether they know it or not”.



... And the Rest

Canadians were engineers to the American architects during the post-World War II reconstruction, admitted to the [G7](#) (1976) and then a godfather to the [G20](#). In helping to create the rules-based order, Canada introduced the principle of [‘functionalism’](#). This is the abiding legacy of Louis St. Laurent, Lester Pearson and others - internationalists by conviction, they were realists by experience. Canada was not a great world power, but in certain sectors – food and energy - we had vital interests and capacity. This merited a place at the table. With competence, investment and artful diplomacy we earned our seat in the UN’s functional agencies and, albeit temporarily, joined the great powers on the Security Council.

Today, Canada belongs to almost every multilateral club, be it economic, security, or with a general or specific purpose in creation. On balance this is a good thing, but prioritization of attention and resources is overdue. We pride ourselves on our multilateralism but the recent defeat in our quest for a temporary seat on the UN Security Council (we lost to Norway and Ireland) should serve as a wake-up call that proclaiming [‘Canada is back’](#) does not make it so. It means investments in collective security and defence as well as development assistance and the kind of helpful fixing that we are doing with the Lima Group in Venezuela and through the Ottawa Group in working to reform the World Trade Organization.

There are long and historic links with Europe and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) is capstone to continuing efforts at closer economic relations. The Harper government negotiated CETA, but the Trudeau government concluded it, and it took effect in 2017.

With the rise of Asia, Canada’s transpacific trade and security interests now matter as much as the traditional orientation across the Atlantic. The new 11-nation Comprehensive and Progressive Trans Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) that gives freer trade with Japan, a goal sought since Pierre Trudeau’s days. A member of APEC since its inception, Canada needs strengthen its defence and

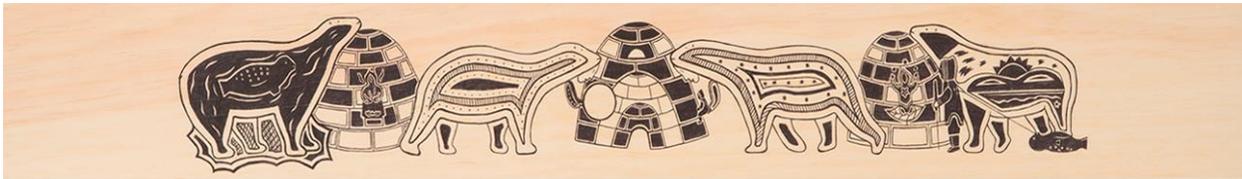


serving prime minister, Mackenzie King, a pudgy bachelor who engaged in seances so he could speak to his dead mother:

We had no shape
Because he never took sides;
And no sides
Because he never allowed them to take shape...

Do nothing by halves
Which can be done by quarters.

While it was not meant as a compliment, Scott unwittingly captured the Canadian formula of accommodation.



Further Reading

The major news outlets: CBC -Radio Canada, CTV, Global, Globe and Mail, National Post, La Presse, IPolitics, Hill Times, Toronto Star and Maclean's all provide daily electronic updates. The journalists I regularly read and trust for reportage and insights are Susan Delacourt, Tonda MacCharles and Chantal Hébert in the *Toronto Star*, Maclean's Paul Wells (who is also the author of a number of excellent books on Canadian politics and hosts [In Conversation](#) with policy-makers), John Ibbitson and Andrew Coyne in the *Globe and Mail*, John Ivison in the *National Post*. Hébert, Wells and Coyne, and *Huffington Post*'s Althia Raj appear regularly on CBC's Thursday night At Issue panel hosted by Rosemary Barton. Vassy Kapelos hosts Power and Politics on CBC every weeknight, while Evan Solomon hosts Power Play on CTV. CPAC has a good newscast with Peter Van Dusen, and, during the parliamentary season, Mark Sutcliffe does a morning podcast digest of the news and opinion for CPAC. Global's Mercedes Stephenson hosts West Block on Sunday morning and Evan Solomon hosts CTV's Question Period. Chris Hall's The House on CBC Radio is required listening on Saturday mornings.

To get a sense of Quebec, read Joel-Denis Bellavance of *La Presse*, Daniel Leblanc of the *Globe and Mail* and Hélène Buzzetti of *Le Devoir*.

The journalists who write regularly on Canadian foreign policy include Mike Blanchfield from Canadian Press, David Ljunggren from Reuters, Campbell Clark in the *Globe and Mail* and Murray Brewster who covers defence for CBC. The *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist* have Canadian correspondents.

Nik Nanos does a weekly running [tracking poll](#) that should be your first stop. Abacus's David Coletto and Bruce Anderson have regular [surveys](#). Other pollsters of note include Darrell Bricker of [IPSOS](#) and Frank Graves of [EKOS](#), as well as [Mainstreet](#) and [Angus Reid](#) and, for Quebec, [Leger](#).

For an easy and fun insight into Canadian history, watch the [Heritage Minutes](#) produced by the Historica Foundation. There is also the online [Canadian Encyclopedia](#) and [A Country By Consent](#).



Read Charlotte Gray's *Promise of Canada* and Andrew Cohen's *Lester B. Pearson*, the story of our greatest diplomat who became prime minister. The Pearson book is part of the Penguin Extraordinary Canadians short biography series, another good way to get to know Canada. Richard Gwyn has penned a superb two volume biography of our first prime minister Sir John A. Macdonald: *John A: The Man who Made us* and *Nation Maker*. If you go to a used book store look for my favourite quartet of past Canadian chroniclers: Pierre Berton, Peter C. Newman and Peter Gzowski.

For single histories, look at Conrad Black's rambunctious *Rise to Greatness: The History of Canada from the Vikings to the Present* or Robert Bothwell's *Penguin History of Canada*, Desmond Morton's *A Short History of Canada*, or Will Ferguson's *Canadian History for Dummies*. For Canadian military history, look to the works of historians David Bercuson, Jack Granatstein and Des Morton. I think the best single-volume history of Canada and the U.S. is *Your Country, My Country: A Unified History of the United States and Canada*, by historian Robert Bothwell. The Canadian Government has also produced [Discover Canada](#), a study guide on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

On contemporary politics: Read *National Post* columnist John Ivison's *Trudeau: The Education of a Prime Minister* and Aaron Wherry's *Promise and Peril: Justin Trudeau in Power*. Nik Nanos looks at populism in his *Age of Voter Rage: Trump, Trudeau, Farage, Corbyn & Macron – The Tyranny of Small Numbers*. Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson wrote in *The Big Shift: The Seismic Change in Canadian Politics, Business, and Culture and What It Means for Our Future* that Canadian politics, once dominated by the liberal Laurentian elite, is shifting to a conservative western base. Their analysis is good, although I'm not convinced of their conclusion. Their new book, *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline*, argues that Canada will rise as global population declines.

On the role of the provinces and their relationship with the national government, read Ed Whitcomb's [Rivals for Power: Ottawa and the Provinces: The Contentious History of the Canadian Federation](#) and on Canada's relations with its First Nations, his new book *Understanding First Nations: The Legacy of Canadian Colonialism*

To get a good sense of the politics of energy, environment and First Nations, read the late Jim Prentice and J.S. Rioux's *Triple Crown: Winning Canada's Energy Future* and David Yager's *From Miracle to Menace: Alberta, a Carbon Story*.

To understand our government, read Glenn Milne's *Making Policy: A Guide to How the Federal Government Works* (2018). The best guide to the constitutional system remains Eugene Forsey's classic [How Canadians Govern Themselves](#).

On Canadian foreign policy, subscribe to the weekly newsletter or listen to the weekly podcasts of the [Canadian Global Affairs Institute](#). Look also to the Centre for International Governance Innovation's [Open Canada](#), to the research of the [Canadian International Council](#) and to Carleton University's annual [Canada Among Nations](#) and its [Canadian Foreign Policy Journal](#).

The wise former governor general David Johnston – legal scholar, university president, hockey player – has written three books that will enlarge your understanding of Canada. They are *The Idea of Canada: Letters to a Nation*; *Trust: Twenty Ways to Build a Better Country*; and co-written with Tom Jenkins, *Ingenious: How Canadian Innovators Made the World Smarter, Smaller, Kinder, Safer, Healthier, Wealthier and Happier*.

► About the Author

A former Canadian diplomat, **Colin Robertson** is Vice President and Fellow at the [Canadian Global Affairs Institute](#) and hosts its regular [Global Exchange podcast](#). He is an Executive Fellow at the University of Calgary's [School of Public Policy](#) and a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the [Norman Paterson School of International Affairs](#) at Carleton University. A member of the Department of National Defence's Defence Advisory Board, Robertson sits on the advisory councils of the [Johnson-Shoyama School of Public Policy](#), [North American Research Partnership](#), [The Winston Churchill Society of Ottawa](#) and the [Conference of Defence Associations Institute](#) and the North American Forum. He is an [Honorary Captain \(Royal Canadian Navy\)](#) assigned to the Strategic Communications Directorate. During his foreign service career, he served as first Head of the Advocacy Secretariat and Minister at the Canadian Embassy in Washington and Consul General in Los Angeles, as Consul and Counsellor in Hong Kong and in New York at the UN and Consulate General. A member of the teams that negotiated the Canada-U.S. FTA and then the NAFTA, he is a member of the Deputy Minister of International Trade's Trade Advisory Council. He writes on foreign affairs for the [Globe and Mail](#) and he is a frequent contributor to other media. [The Hill Times](#) has named him as one of those that influence Canadian foreign policy.

► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

The Canadian Global Affairs Institute focuses on the entire range of Canada's international relations in all its forms including (in partnership with the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy), trade investment and international capacity building. Successor to the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI, which was established in 2001), the Institute works to inform Canadians about the importance of having a respected and influential voice in those parts of the globe where Canada has significant interests due to trade and investment, origins of Canada's population, geographic security (and especially security of North America in conjunction with the United States), social development, or the peace and freedom of allied nations. The Institute aims to demonstrate to Canadians the importance of comprehensive foreign, defence and trade policies which both express our values and represent our interests.

The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

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