



True North in  
Canadian public policy

# Commentary

March 2017

## Celebrating 150: Why True Patriots Love Canada

*This is a talk delivered at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute's Confederation Dinner on February 16, 2017 to mark the sesquicentennial year of the birth of this country.*

Ladies and gentlemen, mesdames et messieurs.

Welcome to the Macdonald-Laurier Institute's (MLI) celebration of Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday year. Bienvenue et merci d'être venus si nombreux à ce banquet de l'institut Macdonald-Laurier pour célébrer le 150<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire de la confédération canadienne.

I'm Brian Lee Crowley, the Managing Director of the Institute. Je m'appelle Brian Lee Crowley and je suis le directeur-général de l'institut.

Our sesquicentennial year is a wonderful time to celebrate what is great about Canada, and indeed MLI is dedicated to the proposition that Canada is a country well worth celebrating, as anyone who looks at conditions in other countries can quickly see. But what, exactly, is it that makes Canada great?

Everybody has a country, but Syrians or Burmese or Iranians or Nigerians or Ukrainians do not have the same reasons to celebrate that we do. Everybody may have a national day, but some people live in fear of their government, which tends to dampen their patriotic ardour.

Democracy is certainly part of why we want to celebrate Canada, but it is actually a far smaller part of what makes this country great than most people imagine. From time to time crazy people in faraway places have risen to power through ostensibly democratic institutions. Dictators have often used the form of democracy to legitimize their rule, after democracy's precious essence had long since expired.

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It cannot be “diversity” that we celebrate, at least not in its risible institutional form. The Soviet Union was home to huge ethnic diversity, but its people had to be prevented at gunpoint from leaving. And, in any case, I would argue that diversity is not the *cause* of Canada’s greatness, but rather one of its *effects*. People come here because of who we are, not because some others came before. They are all here for the same reason, in my view, and diversity’s not it.

“Free” health care or unemployment insurance can’t be the answer. Canada was a desirable place before those relatively recent innovations, just as there are societies with more developed social programs. Yet Canadians do not aspire to move there, whereas people from there aspire to move here.

When my ancestors, Laurence and Honora Crowley set sail from County Cork in Ireland in the early 1800s, never again to see the land of their birth, to arrive to what was to become Canada, they didn’t come seeking free visits to the doctor’s office. They didn’t come and settle in the wilderness and clear away the forest to create a prosperous farm (still owned by Crowleys today, five generations later by the way), creamery, and cheese factory for the quality of the public schools and other services. There weren’t any. And yet Laurence and Honora and millions of others flocked to Canada. Why?

Because there is something about Canada that doesn’t just make it a pleasant place to live with good public services and people from many countries. It is one of a handful of societies that the rest of the world looks on in envy. If we opened the doors to this country tomorrow, the torrent of humanity that would sweep in would be beyond imagining. As a politician I heard once said, “this place would look like WalMart on a Saturday morning.”

Let me suggest that there are three things that make Canada a great nation and a nation worth celebrating.

The first is that, like America and Australia, we are a creature of the New World. We are not an ancient civilization like Europe or the Middle East or China. We have escaped much of the prejudice and many of the social and cultural barriers that disfigured the Old World. Our life prospects are not determined by our religion, our ethnicity, our accent, our caste, our party membership, or our social class. That does not mean that people don’t fail (they do) or that poverty does not exist (it does). It means that the barriers I’ve described are not impermeable here as they are in many other societies.

Yes, there has been prejudice. Laurence and Honora suffered from the prejudice against the Catholic Irish common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it cannot have been easy to be native Irish speakers who were, in Honora’s case, illiterate according to the Canada West census taken a few years after they arrived. But that prejudice has been overcome, and we have worked successfully to defeat many other such prejudices over this country’s history. Some remain; the disgraceful plight of many Indigenous people in Canada, for instance, tells us that there is still work to be done.

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But that does not negate what we have accomplished. People come to Canada so that the sum of their life choices, and especially the life choices of their children, is not determined at their birth. People born here literally cannot imagine what that's like, and so don't appreciate how rare an achievement it is. But those who come here know, and often make great sacrifices so that their children will never know a society where your fate is sealed before you take your first breath.

That reminds us that what makes Canada great is not, say, multiculturalism, although there is nothing wrong with that. But, as Sir Wilfrid Laurier said in his great speech on the admission of Alberta into the Dominion, it is fine to celebrate where your parents came from and the traditions they brought with them, but surely what matters most of all is how we work together here, not looking backward at what we were, at our different origins or our diverse points of departure, but looking forward together to what we are becoming and creating a better country here for our children, all of whom are Canadians.

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The second thing that makes Canada great is freedom. Canada is free and freedom is her nationality, intoned Sir Wilfrid Laurier, and in so doing encapsulated the great tradition of freedom which has been bequeathed to us, a tradition that finds its roots in the British liberal tradition, but whose benefits have been conferred on every Canadian, regardless of their ethnic origin, their religion, or their language.

Too many people believe that freedom was somehow introduced to Canada by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. But that Charter is an important document precisely because it codifies part of a tradition that reaches back deep into our colonial past and beyond that to the common law, Sir Edward Coke, the Glorious Revolution, and the Magna Carta - a tradition of freedom that drew Laurence and Honora across the Atlantic with barely the clothes on their back, knowing almost nothing of how they would make their living here but knowing that energy and commitment and hard work would be rewarded, so that you would be entitled to keep the fruits of your labour.

That freedom includes, by the way, institutions that most of the rest of the world still has not mastered - things like the rule of law, non-corrupt judges and police, reasonably speedy and predictable resolution of disputes, moderate levels of taxation, stability of property and its transference by consent, the certainty that defeated governments will leave office and that elections actually choose governments. Added to the civil freedoms of speech and religion and conscience and assembly, this makes an inheritance of freedom almost without peer in the world. And those who look in vain for the Canadian mainstream, for the Canadian values that unite us, have not looked here or they would understand their error.

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Finally, what makes Canada great is our willingness to sacrifice to protect this precious and rare inheritance. When Laurence and Honora arrived they could not have known that their grandson, my grandfather Lee, whose name I proudly bear, would fight in the Great War or that his son, my father Lawrence, named for that first Laurence

to arrive on our shores, would serve in both the Second World War and Korea. Whether facing down Nazism, Communism, or Salafi Jihadism, whether in Korea, in Kosovo, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, or soon in Latvia, Canadians have always been willing to put everything on the line so that the things we most value will be protected at home and abroad because, as Tommy Douglas so sagely observed, what we want for ourselves we desire for all.

The willingness to sacrifice in order to protect the freedoms uniquely available to us in the New World: now that, ladies and gentlemen, is a country worth celebrating.

But perhaps this is an old-fashioned and historically ignorant patriotism of a now unfashionable kind. According to Samuel Johnson, patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel. If the views of Canada's young people – as revealed in a recent Angus Reid/CBC poll – are anything to go by, they largely agree with Johnson.

As Angus Reid notes, “Massive generational differences affect Canadians’ sense of pride and attachment to their country: nearly three-quarters (73%) of those 65 years or older profess a ‘deep attachment’ to Canada, this shrinks to less than half (45%) among those aged 18-24.”<sup>1</sup>

Angus Reid further points out that in the recent past, ambivalent or negative sentiment about Canada was concentrated in Quebec; differences among Canadians on this question were therefore chiefly regional. Today it is the young who are far more conditional in their enthusiasm for Canada than their elders.

If this is just a new manifestation of the old phenomenon of idealistic youth versus worldly-wise experience, it is perhaps nothing to worry about. If, by contrast, it portends a long-term shift in Canadians’ commitment to Canada, I think that would not just be a pity, but a loss to the world as well as to Canada.

In a way I am not surprised that young Canadians view Canada with some suspicion. Talk to many of them and you may be dismayed by how little they know about our country, how it came to be, and what it represents. Equally, much of what they have been taught is that our past is nothing but a repository for all that is retrograde and shameful. It is filled with racism, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, militarism, genocide, and environmental destruction.

It is easy to criticize the past and the decisions made there. But it is a conceit of each and every generation that they alone are free from poor judgments and intellectual shortcomings and historical myopia.

Looking solely at our past errors is not the right standard by which to measure Canada and its great achievements. Remember that poverty, squalor, filth, disease, and intolerance have been humanity’s lot since the beginning; taken together they are not the exception but the default condition of human beings. Only a handful of societies have figured out, slowly and painfully, the institutions and behaviours that allow people to escape these ills.

Canada is at the forefront of those nations and it is thanks to our history of struggle against the worst human afflictions that we now enjoy the conditions where our young people can look back in horror at how things used

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to be. It is the progress made possible by the economic, social and, yes, moral advances of our forebears that have allowed us to enjoy peace, order, and good government in generous measure.

As the head of an institution that bears the names of our two greatest founding prime ministers, and at a dinner celebrating 150 years of Confederation, I cannot help but observe that Confederation itself was no exercise in crude majoritarian triumphalism. Instead it was an exquisitely wrought compromise between contending cultures, languages, and religions that has made us one of the longest-enduring political orders on the planet.

We have constantly expanded our notion of rights in response to genuine wrongs and real grievances. Canadian blood and treasure were expended in righteous struggles like the Second World War and Korea because when the world called we were not found wanting. As Canadians have become wealthier, we have worked to improve our environment, our education, and our social supports.

It appears that this generation is the one called upon to right the many wrongs done to Aboriginal peoples in our history. In mentioning this, I would be most remiss if I did not acknowledge that we are honoured this evening to be on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people. We cannot change the past, but it does not require us to despise our past to say that our job is to make sure that past mistakes shall not be tolerated on our watch.

Like all real virtues, as Aristotle taught us, true patriotism is a mid-point between two extremes. On the one hand is narrow, bellicose, xenophobic nationalism, of which we have perhaps seen all too much in recent times; on the other hand is a bloodless, rootless cosmopolitanism that loves an abstract humanity but not any actual flawed community of real people. True patriots love Canada because it has made us (including those who have come to join us from other countries) who we are; and who we are, for all our flaws, is a standard to which much of the rest of the world aspires, and with very good reason.

Thank you.

## Endnotes

1 Angus Reid Institute. 2016. "What makes us Canadian? A study of values, beliefs, priorities and identity." Angus Reid Institute, October 3. Available at [angusreid.org/canada-values/](http://angusreid.org/canada-values/).

# About the Author



**B**rian Lee Crowley has headed up the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI) in Ottawa since its inception in March of 2010, coming to the role after a long and distinguished record in the think tank world. He was the founder of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) in Halifax, one of the country's leading regional think tanks. He is a former Salvatori Fellow at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC and is a Senior Fellow at the Galen Institute in Washington. In addition, he advises several think tanks in Canada, France, and Nigeria.

Crowley has published numerous books, most recently *Northern Light: Lessons for America from Canada's Fiscal Fix*, which he co-authored with Robert P. Murphy and Niels Veldhuis and two bestsellers: *Fearful Symmetry: the fall and rise of Canada's founding values* (2009) and MLI's first book, *The Canadian Century; Moving Out of America's Shadow*, which he co-authored with Jason Clemens and Niels Veldhuis.

Crowley twice won the Sir Antony Fisher Award for excellence in think tank publications for his health care work and in 2011 accepted the award for a third time for MLI's book, *The Canadian Century*.

From 2006–08 Crowley was the Clifford Clark Visiting Economist with the federal Department of Finance. He has also headed the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC), and has taught politics, economics, and philosophy at various universities in Canada and Europe.

Crowley is a frequent commentator on political and economic issues across all media. He holds degrees from McGill and the London School of Economics, including a doctorate in political economy from the latter.





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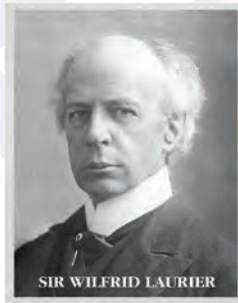
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