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## Kinder, Gentler Canada

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If President Bill Clinton wants to see how activist government can solve social problems with strong public support, he should take a few days to visit Canada. With Toronto's World Series victory, the nationwide referendum on constitutional reform (including the status of Quebec), and the controversy over the North American Free Trade Agreement, Canada lately has been in the American news more than at any time in recent memory. But despite all this attention, there's a Canada few Americans know about—a nation whose citizens are better off than their American counterparts in many ways: safer cities, less poverty, fewer homeless, lower infant mortality, and healthier workplaces.

Clinton has pledged to introduce, during the first 100 days, comprehensive health care reform. Thanks to the recent national debate over our country's health care crisis, many Americans now know that Canada does a better job of providing decent health care for all its citizens at a reasonable cost. The U.S. spends more on health expenditures—12.4 percent of its GNP and \$2,566 per capita—than any country in the world, but 37 million people are without insurance. Canada spends 9 percent of GNP and \$1,795 per capita and provides coverage for all residents, financed by a single-payer system that eliminates much bureaucratic waste and controls costs. Many American health care experts, political candidates, and public officials look longingly at the "Canadian model."

But there are other features of Canadian society from which Americans might draw lessons for improving social and economic conditions at home. Unfortunately, Canada's successful housing programs, labor laws, environmental and workplace safety regulations, urban planning practices, social welfare policies, women's rights laws, and mass transit system—which are superior to those in the U.S.—rarely make the

American news. How many Americans realize, for example, that Canada provides its citizens with a shorter worktime, greater employment security, and a broader social safety net than the United States?

In world affairs and in economic relations, Canada has long been the "junior partner" of the United States. As a result, Americans have often not taken Canada very seriously. Some even resented the Toronto Blue Jays' World Series victory. These Americans have long viewed Canada as a second-rate country, so losing to a Canadian team (even if no players are actually Canadians) hurts their national pride, already wounded by an economic recession and decline in global power. The Canadians' rejection of the nationwide referendum designed to bind Quebec with the rest of the country allowed American editorialists to poke fun at the country's chronic "identity crisis" and seemingly reaffirmed American superiority.

That attitude is a mistake that blinds

Americans to the many things that Canada can teach the U.S. about creating a more liveable society. Canada's experience suggests that activist government does not inevitably lead to bureaucratic red tape, the erosion of the work ethic, a decline in personal freedom, or a weaker economy. Both Canada and the U.S. are caught in the current global recession. But in terms of productivity growth, budget deficits, export growth, and other indicators of

economic well-being, Canada outperforms the United States. And in terms of our two countries' social well-being, it is no contest (see box below).

While Canada is seen as more racially homogenous than the U.S., both countries are in fact torn by regional, racial, and cultural/ethnic differences. In particular, there are long-standing grievances of Canada's French-speaking population center in Quebec and of Canada's indigenous peo-

### ... And They Won the World Series, Too

- 20.4 percent of American children live in poverty, compared with 9.3 percent of Canadian children.
- 10.9 percent of Americans over 65 live in poverty, compared with 2.2 percent of Canadians.
- The U.S. infant mortality rate of 10 deaths per 1,000 live births is highest of the 19 major industrial countries; Canada's rate is 7 deaths per 1,000 live births.
- Canada ranks seventh in life expectancy (77 years); the U.S. ranks fifteenth (75.9 years).
- The U.S. is the only major country without a national maternity leave policy. Canadian women receive 17 to 18 weeks of paid maternity leave.
- In the U.S., only 33 percent of unemployed workers receive unemployment insurance benefits, which provide up to 64 percent of weekly wages for a maximum of \$291 a week up to 26 weeks. (This time limit was recently temporarily increased because of high unemployment.) In Canada, 59 percent of unemployed workers get benefits, for up to 50 weeks, paying up to 60 percent of their former pay levels to a maximum of \$396 a week.
- The U.S. ranks first in the world with 9.4 murders per 100,000 population. Canada's rate is 5.5 murders per 100,000 population.
- Between 1988 and 1990, 9,602 Americans (38.3 per million) were killed with handguns. The compatible figures for Canada are 8 and 0.3 million.
- The U.S. ranks first in children's deaths due to homicide: 3.7 out of 1,000 American children (aged 1 to 19), compared with 1.1 out of 1,000 Canadian.
- During the late 1980s, the U.S. produced more hazardous waste—110,000 tons per 100,000 people—than any other country. Canada ranked second, but with only 12,500 tons per 100,000 people.
- The U.S. spends 4.77 percent of its GDP in public dollars on education, compared with 6.53 percent in Canada.
- When 14-year-olds in 17 countries were given a science test, the U.S. ranked fifteenth. Canada ranked fourth.
- In 1991, corporate CEOs in the U.S. (in firms with sales over \$250 million) received an average remuneration of \$747,500, 25 times the average pay of manufacturing employees. Their counterparts in Canada received \$407,600, or 12 times the pay of manufacturing workers.
- American workers get 10.8 paid vacation days per year—last among the 19 major industrial nations; although Canadians rank next to last, they get 14.7.

ples (Native Canadians). But in Canada, race, ethnic, and regional differences do not dominate discussions of social welfare policy or undermine support for assistance to the poor. In fact, poverty in Quebec is lower than in several English-speaking provinces.

But, some say, Americans prize individualism and the private market, while Canadians put a higher premium on government activism to solve common problems. Public opinion surveys, however, reveal that the views of ordinary citizens in Canada and the U.S. about the roles of government and business in society are more alike than different. Americans are just as concerned about their economic future, their environment, the social conditions of their cities, and the plight of the poor as their Canadian neighbors.

The difference is that in Canada, politics is more participatory and democratic. Public opinion is more easily translated into public policy. Five key factors, in particular, help shape Canada's enlightened social and economic policies.

**Big Money.** Business interests and big money do not dominate Canadian politics. Canadian law sets ceilings on how much political parties and candidates can spend in an election campaign. Both the public and private broadcast media are required to provide each party with free time, and there are limits on what each party can spend on paid advertising. There are also tight limits on how much individuals, corporations, and trade associations can donate to candidates.

**Voter Participation.** Voters in both countries must be registered in order to vote. But in Canada, the government assumes responsibility for registering voters. In Canada, when an election is called, a complete national registration is carried out in a matter of weeks by a federal agency called Elections Canada. In national elections, over 70 percent of eligible voters normally go to the polls.

In the U.S., the onus of registration is entirely on the individual citizen. It was

considered a major step forward last November 3 when 55 percent of eligible voters went to the polls. Typically, only about half of the eligible electorate regularly votes in a presidential election year and even less in off years. Registration rules differ from state to state and, often, from community to community. Not surprisingly, in the U.S., the poor, minorities, and young people are less likely to register, which undermines their political influence. In July, President Bush vetoed the National Voter Registration Act (the so-called "motor voter" law), which would have significantly increased voter participation by streamlining and improving voter registration efforts. In the U.S., about 70 percent of registered voters actually vote—close to Canada's turnout figure—confirming the importance of registration.

**Strong Parties.** Political parties in Canada are much more coherent and ideological than their American counterparts. In the U.S., party politics is dominated by candidate-centered campaigns. An individual seeking to win a party nomination must pull together his or her campaign apparatus (such as a staff and mailing lists), raise money, fashion positions on issues, and garner endorsements from organizations. In Canada, political parties are membership organizations that play a major role in assisting candidates with their campaign, fundraising, and organizing. In return, candidates and elected officials running on the party banner are charged with carrying out the program of their respective parties. In contrast to the U.S., there are few topics in Canadian politics that are left out of political debate because of bipartisan agreement. Not surprisingly, there is a livelier political debate and a broader mainstream political spectrum in Canada.

**A Well-Organized Democratic Left.** Although Canada's third party, the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), founded in 1961, has never garnered more than 20 percent of the popular vote in a federal election, it has exerted considerable

influence in Canadian politics. For example, Canada's universal, single-payer health care program was first developed by the NDP provincial government of Saskatchewan, where its success catalyzed a national debate and adoption of the program across Canada. When Pierre Trudeau's Liberal Party needed NDP support to hold power in Ottawa, the NDP used its bargaining power to pass a mixed-income nonprofit housing program that has been very successful. The NDP currently governs Ontario (the largest province) as well as British Columbia and Saskatchewan, together representing a majority of the Canadian population.

The parliamentary system makes it easier for third, or minority, parties to emerge. But the concentration in such a system means that minority opposition parties have very little real power. Yet the NDP—through a combination of winning power at the provincial level, occasionally holding the balance of power, and providing a consistent, organized alternative voice at the national level—has had a lasting progressive influence on Canadian politics.

**An Active Labor Movement.** The Canadian labor movement is stronger, more progressive, and more politically active than its American counterpart. Unions today represent about 38 percent of Canada's work force, compared with less than 16 percent in the United States. The Canadian labor movement was a cofounder of the NDP and plays a major role in formulating party policy; many labor activists have been elected to party offices and run as NDP candidates in local, provincial, and federal elections. Because most workplace-related laws, and much social legislation, is a provincial responsibility, and because the NDP has held power in several provinces, labor has played a major role in shaping social and economic conditions. The NDP has promoted a higher minimum wage, labor law reform, and pay equity legislation. Canada has no anti-union "right-to-

work" laws; prohibits permanent replacement workers (strikebreakers); and has quicker, fairer recognition procedures for unions and strong sanctions against employer interference in union organizing.

Moreover, labor in Canada has a broader political vision than its American counterpart. Its "social unionism" perspective—incorporating the broad concerns of working people on the job and as citizens of the larger society—brings labor into alliances with feminists, environmentalists, housing activists, the peace movement, and other progressive forces. As a result, labor is not easily relegated to the charge of representing a "special interest group."

Just as Canada overcame the political obstacles to social and economic reform, so can the United States. After all, the commonalities between the U.S. and Canada are much greater than their differences. Each nation is the other's largest trading partner. Both are now coping with a new global economy and the end of the Cold War—a major factor in the recently signed North American Free Trade Agreement.

Since 1984 Canada has had a conservative national government in Ottawa, headed by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, that has sought to roll back social and economic progress in much the same fashion that the Reagan/Bush and Thatcher administrations sought. But Mulroney has been much less successful than his role models in Washington and London because Canadians like their "social contract" with government and express their views through their political organizations.

Canada is no social utopia. But it has managed to carve out a set of social and economic policies that, compared with the U.S., is more humane, progressive, and efficient. As the two countries are drawn closer together—in part by the recent free trade agreement—Americans should make sure that on social policy, the U.S. becomes more like Canada, and not the other way around. ♦