

American / Canadian relations, post September 11th 2001: accommodation or surrender?

Before 2001 ends it will sound cliché to say, "The events of September 11th changed the world." The chorographic hijacking that day of four inter-continental, commercial airliners over the eastern seaboard of America was not part of any military intelligence for attacking the world's most advanced nation. Neither were the suicidal missions at the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon considered a possibility.

The reality that a group of fellow human beings would use commercial airlines to kill thousands of innocent people going about their daily business has placed all nations on high alert. Given the influence of U.S. markets on global trade, most countries will experience economic consequences from September 11th.

Canada is America's largest trading partner. Canadians and Americans visit each other's country routinely as tourist and on business. Millions of North American visitors each year transcend the border in both directions. Americans and Canadians refer to the 6,440-kilometre border between their two countries as the world's largest undefended border with pride. It is portrayed as the model for all international boundaries. In addition to the economic consequences of September 11th, Canadians are witnessing major socio-political shifts in their relations with Americans.

Over the decades there have been strains in this seemingly family relationship. These strains reflect the cultural differences between the two countries. The American constitution defends the right of every American to seek "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". The Canadian constitution promotes a belief among its citizenry in "peace order and good government."

The rugged individualism that has built America, is respected from afar in Canada, but tends to be less tolerated in Canadian society. In Canada the American emphasis on individualism is seen as Americans defending their right to carry a gun, but does not define a role for government in supporting the disenfranchised members of their society.

Canadian values in health, education, employment, immigration, and the uniquely Canadian attribute of "multi-culturalism" include a definitive role for government. This philosophy is supported through Canada's Human Rights Charter and is an integral part of Canadian



immigration and refugee policies. American authorities believe that such liberal legislation allow terrorists to use Canada as a staging ground for attacking America.

No evidence has been produced that the September 11th terrorists had any connections with Canada. However, during the millennium celebrations a terrorist, associated with Osama bin Laden, was caught smuggling a homemade bomb from Canada into the U.S. This incident changed how America views its friends to the north. Attorney-General John Ashcroft recently described the border as "a transit point for several individuals involved in terrorism."

The outpouring of grief and sympathy by Canadians over the tragedy of September 11th has resulted in a desire to define a new kind of relationship with their neighbours to the south. Public opinion polls show the majority of Canadians accepting harmonizing of immigration laws between Canada and the U.S. Canadian business interests have formed the Coalition for a Secure and Trade-Efficient Border to lobby the Canadian government in support of a North American perimeter.

Paul Cellucci, the U.S. ambassador to Canada, is promoting a North American security perimeter that would include Canada. Failure by Canada to accept such an approach, he warns, could result in devastating consequences for cross-border trade and tourism. He has received support from several provincial premiers. However, Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister John Manley, has rejected this proposal calling it a "simplistic solution to a complex problem". The prevailing policy of the Canadian government is to tighten up its administration of all ports of entry.

In the meantime the U.S. Congress has passed legislation with a \$600 million package tripling the number of customs and border patrol officers at Canadian crossing points, funding biometric scanners and fingerprint processors. Canada's Revenue Minister Martin Cauchon maintains that there is no need for such a massive border build-up. Canada now spends \$425-million on all customs operations in an entire year.

The Canadian economy is very dependent on efficient flow of people and products across the U.S.- Canada border. The post September 11th world means that Canada will have to accommodate additional lengthy customs and identification inspections or surrender to America's anti-terrorist policies. The majority of Canadians, as well as the business community, are in favour of a single North American perimeter. It will be interesting to see how long the Canadian government can maintain sovereignty of its immigration and customs services in defiance of America's need to demonstrate that it is winning the war against terrorism.

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Note: This article was written soon after 9/11 in an attempted to explain to non-North Americans the differences between being Canadian and being American and how that event could influence the relationships between both countries. Such insight has been gained from having had to explain to Americans how Canada's health system differs from the U.S. model(s).