



Twenty Five Years after the Meech Lake Accord

Canada was invited by American revolutionaries [to join in our war of independence](#). We also invited the British colonies in the West Indies to become part of our new nation. The thirteen colonies who fought the British might have been fifteen or sixteen, if these English speaking colonies next to our thirteen colonies had decided to fight with us. In the case of those territories that evolved into the nation of Canada, there were real antagonism between the English and the French-speaking peoples.



The long and moving poem, [Evangeline](#), describes the travails of those French colonists who were forcibly moved from Canada to Louisiana. The [Acadian](#) French so transported from their homeland to the swamps of Louisiana became the Cajuns of today. Those who have watched the delightful cooking programs of the late Justin Wilson hear at the beginning of his show a quick summary of that transportation and how it ended up inspiring a unique style of cooking.

The Continental Congress sent three letters to Canada, inviting those colonists to join our revolution, and these appealed, particularly, to the French-speaking colonists. The third letter was sent before our Declaration of Independence and it was addressed to our “Friends and Countrymen.” The colonials in Canada remain loyal to Britain and, indeed, a fair number of Tories fled to Canada. Ironically, the very colonials to whom our Continental Congress was appealing most specifically, the French colonials, stood with Britain although these Québécois later became most unhappy Canadians.

Although Quebec remained French-speaking, other parts of Canada were not. Western Canada — Rupert’s Land — is roughly what we would call Ontario today, was principally English. The Atlantic Provinces, however, had a blending of peoples. Nova Scotia, for example, is Latin for “New Scotland.” British North America, as Canada was called after we won our independence, included Newfoundland, Rupert’s Land, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Quebec. Nova Scotia was divided into the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

The governance of these provinces was much like the governance of the American colonies before our Revolutionary War — except that because of our example, the British governed these northern colonies with a looser hand. It was not until after our Civil War that the British Parliament passed the British North America Act of 1867, and this was followed by a number of other British North America Acts passed in London, despite the fact that these laws granted Canada self-government. By 1950, when the Canadian Parliament itself began passing these acts, our neighbor to the north had become essentially independent.

The current ten provinces was a fluctuating number. Newfoundland (which is the continental territory of Labrador and the island of Newfoundland) was an independent colony of the British Empire through the Second World War. In 1867 Nova Scotia was one of the four founding provinces of the Canadian Confederation, along with Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick. Prince Edward Island also was a fairly late joiner in 1873. The Canadian frontier movement through future colonies like Manitoba,



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Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia largely mirrored our own frontier, with the evolution of territories into self-governing provinces that acquired representation in the national government.

In many ways, Canada was a mirror of the United States. Like us, it was pulled into the First World War to help the mother country in the trenches of the Western Front (just as the Australians and New Zealanders bled and died at Gallipoli as soldiers of the British Empire.) The Canadians had no more interest in warring with us than we with them, and the border between the United States and Canada has long been the longest unfortified border in the world or, indeed, in the history of the world.

Canada, like the United States, was a magnet for the refugees of the wars and tyrannies of the Old World. The broad landlocked provinces of Western Canada — Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta — became the new home to the wheat growing farmers who fled the horrors inflicted on the Ukraine. These industrious farmers, in fact, raised the money to fund Robert Conquest's [The Harvest of Sorrow](#) and Canada became the first nation in the world to recognize the Holodomor — the genocide by starvation of 6.5 million Ukrainians, because Conquest found no one in Hollywood who felt that this story deserved telling.

In other ways, though, Canada was different than the United States. The head of state remained the British Monarch, although represented in Canada by a Governor-General (the same was true of the other self-governing commonwealth nations like Australia and New Zealand.) In particular, the nature of “federalism” in Canada was different than in the United States, with its provinces not enjoying the amount of sovereignty retained by U.S. states under the Tenth Amendment. This was true, also, of Australia, which had historically granted each of the six states of Australia virtually co-equal rights with the national government.

Canadian federalism was also stretched by the general unhappiness with French-speaking Quebec. In the 1960s, French President de Gaulle went to Quebec and proclaimed his support for a Free Quebec. The Canadian “constitution,” which was to a large extent a series of statutes passed in London with the general concurrence of the Canadians, seemed to allow Quebec, or any other province, to withdraw from the dominion. Twenty-five years ago, when the Francophone Quebecois agitation was threatening to unravel Canada, the prime minister of Newfoundland blithely suggested that if the negotiations were not to his liking, then Newfoundland, too, would declare its separation from the rest of Canada.

Canadian politics has long been governed by the strong separatist movement in Quebec, which, like the rest of Canada's provinces, is represented in the national parliament. Today it has only four seats out of 306, but in recent parliaments the Bloc Québécois has had 35 to 50 seats and there was a period in the 1990s in which it was the second largest party, the formal “opposition.” The legislature of Quebec itself has a very large separatist party.

Although Quebec has dominated the “federalism” issues in Canadian politics over the last fifty years, it is worth noting that other provinces have either been late joiners (Newfoundland) or have actually sought to become independent (Nova Scotia.) Today, as much frustration with Ottawa exists in the provinces of the West — Alberta, in particular — because of federal friction with the natural resources of these provinces and the imposition of values at the federal level contrary to those of the citizens of the province. Separatism is alive and well. The [Wild Rose Party](#) of Alberta just lost provincial elections, but if it gains power in Alberta, separatism may be alive and well again.

Twenty-five years ago, the [Meech Lake Accord](#) was intended to handle the “problem” of separatism. It recognized that Quebec was a “distinct society” in Canada and it produced an odd combination of



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politically conservative Alberta joining with socialist-leaning Quebec to call for more partnership between Ottawa and the provincial governments and less-centralized federalism. Meech Lake has kept Canada united, and in that sense the agreement hammered out by Prime Minister Mulroney has been a political success. A deeper question, however, might be whether the peoples of Canada have been better off with a national government that continues to accrete power or whether the devolution of power back to the provinces might have produced a happier condition. The verdict on that question is not yet in.



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