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Whither Canada?

A Book Review by Mark Wegierski

Lansing Lamont was *Time's* chief correspondent in Canada between 1971-1973, and managing director for Canadian Affairs at the Americas Society from 1981-1991, so this book represents the view that Canada is a significant player in the American liberal foreign policy establishment, and is quite possibly a reflection of a larger slice of opinion in that sector. Lamont certainly does not say anything that is unusual today.

Lamont's book includes a bibliography and index, but no footnotes. The work is divided into two parts, "Canada at the Crossroads", and "Scenario for the Future." This "Scenario" is already "off," as the Parti Québécois has actually won (by a large margin of seats) the provincial election in Quebec which Lamont had predicted they would lose.

In the reviewer's opinion, although Lamont does make some attempt to look closely at Canadian history, politics, culture, and sense of identity — and to go beyond the utterly desiccated notions that prevail in current-day Canada — he does not probe boldly enough. Never offering in the book a coherent, consistent definition of what might constitute a true nation, Lamont often flounders in his attempts to describe Canada's national identity. For example, he follows the very common interpretation of Canadian Confederation as the birth of a new nation, whereas it might better be described as the birth of a new *state*, the compact of two, pre-existing nations, the English and French Canadas. He fundamentally misreads the role of the British heritage and connection to Canada — viewing it in general as a colonial burden, rather than as what was essentially the self-definition of English Canada. Lamont's statement that Canada lacked a flag until the Maple Leaf in 1965 (p. 45), is palpably absurd. The previous Red Ensign had signified the *Britishness* of Canada. And, calling the long-serving Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau "Canada's most impassioned voice for national unity" — while certainly a cliché — is surely ludicrous, since the avowedly internationalist and ultra-cosmopolitan Trudeau probably did most to wreck the traditional Canada, next to Prime Ministers Mulroney and Pearson.

Two easy-to-spot economic errors are that "Mulroney's government had substantially reduced spending" (p. 77) (in fact, the growth curve of the federal debt in that period is virtually logarithmic); and

that, in the aftermath of the hypothetical separation of Quebec, "the Canadian dollar nosedived below the benchmark 80 cent (U.S.) level." In fact the Canadian dollar today — before any kind of the serious turmoil envisaged by Lamont has even taken place — stands hardly over 70 cents (U.S.). [Editor's note: The U.S. dollar against which it is measured dropped 10 percent in the first 10 weeks of 1995.]

Symptomatic of Lamont's often myopic analysis is his view of Canadian multiculturalism, and especially immigration. While he criticizes the former somewhat, he seems to generally view immigration today as a source of economic enrichment for Canada, as well as of salutary population-enhancement for an increasingly ageing society.

Lamont also evaluates the usefulness of a unified Canada to the international liberal global order:

A unified Canada could continue to play an essential role in helping resolve macro problems like the transfer of human resources from poorer to richer regions or the allocation of food supplies for future Somalias. A Canada fissured would find it increasingly difficult to accept dramatically greater numbers of immigrants or to direct huge quotas of its wheat and grain to the world's starving (p. 240).

Without Canada, the world would lose perhaps its most liberal society ... if Canada, long one of the most successful models of a multi-ethnic society, cannot in the end accommodate the regional and linguistic demands of its constituent parts, the obvious question is, who can? What country and what peoples can hope to succeed if the Canadian experiment in tolerance and cooperation is seen to fail? An eclipse of Canada would darken hopes that the democratic ideal is necessarily mankind's salvation (p. 243).

Perhaps the real question to ask is whether a country which the left-leaning economist Barbara Ward once described as the world's "first inter-national nation" (p. 240) is today a real country at all?

On the other hand, the future which Lamont

BREAKUP: THE COMING END
OF CANADA AND THE
STAKES FOR AMERICA
By Lansing Lamont
New York: W. W. Norton, 1994
267 pages, \$25.00

describes for the independent, now-separate Quebec might well be seen as commendable by all true nationalists:

The immigrant populace was already draining away to more amenable cities in Canada and the United States, while potential newcomers bypassed Quebec for more culturally tolerant communities. As their numbers declined, the remaining ... immigrants in Montreal received fewer special services, while the ruling francophone establishment stopped making even halfhearted attempts to integrate the police force, the teacher's unions, and other public institutions. Quebec was, for all practical purposes, closing out its accounts with its irksome minorities, becoming at last the thoroughly pure French state it had always dreamed of being (pp. 202-203).

One does not have to read too closely between the lines to see the sheer joy that current-day Canada brings to the international global elite. Canada can always be counted on to supply UN peacekeepers to the most far-flung corners of the planet; to accept tens of thousands of Third World refugees a year; and to provide an unusually high level of aid to the Third World. It might be remembered that at two summits — one of the Commonwealth and another of *la Francophonie* — Prime Minister Mulroney forgave about 1.5 billion dollars (Canadian) of debt owed to Canada by various black African countries — money which had already been lent at little or no interest. Canada has also been particularly generous in funding the ANC, SWAPO, the Sandinistas, and Castro's Cuba. It was also the allegedly "hard-Tory" regime of Mulroney that raised Canada's immigration levels to a quarter-million persons a year, from the 54,000 or so in Trudeau's last year in office.

The isolated English-Canadian nationalist, conservative, or traditionalist might well give his exasperated support to the separation of Quebec as a gesture of defiance against internationalist liberalism which English Canada is itself incapable of making, having succumbed decades ago. However, it is generally considered now that Quebec separatism may well have peaked — or at least that if the upcoming referendum for Quebec sovereignty fails, that the whole tendency will probably be finished. The reasons for this are primarily demographic. Quebec, having mostly repudiated its once-fervent Roman Catholicism, now has one of the lowest birthrates and highest abortion rates in Canada. Virtually none of the more prolific recent immigrant groups will have anything to do with sovereignty. They simply love the multicultural Canada of thoroughgoing "employment equity" and minority empowerment. Similarly, the Cree and Mohawks in Quebec vastly prefer Canada.

An interesting warning voiced by Lamont is that

Quebec may not be as pro-American as it appears. (One of his curious prognoses is the ramming of an American oil tanker by a Quebec missile-cruiser, supplied by France.) Lamont expresses fears that an independent Quebec may strengthen the global position of France, and create the possibility of French "mischief-making." Again, Lamont shows his loyalty to the international liberal global order centered in North America.

Lamont also fears that moves toward regionalization and separatism might be repeated in the United States itself. To an American like Lamont, fixated on a universalistic and rights-oriented conception of nationhood, the current-day Canada appears highly positive. However, in terms of a more traditional concept of nationality, current-day Canada is the uttermost repudiation of true nationhood. The breakup of Canada could bring into question the conception of an America based on universalistic and rights-oriented nationhood. ■