

*Peter Brimelow is doubly an immigrant — first from England to Canada, and then on to the United States. He is the author of The Patriot Game: Canada and the Canadian Question Revisited (Hoover, 1987) about the conflict of nations in Canada. Mr. Brimelow currently is a senior editor at Forbes magazine, and is at work on a book about American immigration policy. His article, "Time to Rethink Immigration," in the June 22, 1992 issue of National Review reopened the immigration topic for that segment of American conservatives. The following article was first given as a speech on October 25, 1992 to the National Review Institute, with whose permission it is printed here.*

# Does the Nation-State Exist?

By Peter Brimelow

[Mr. Brimelow opened the speech with comments on then-current developments in Canada's constitution debate, and proceeded as follows:]

Let us start with a definition. What is a "nation-state"? It is *the political expression of a nation*. And what is a "nation"? It is an *ethno-cultural community* — an interlacing of ethnicity and culture.

In recent years there has been a tendency to emphasize the cultural part of the equation, particularly in the U.S. But this is to miss a critical point. The word "nation" is derived from the Latin *nescare*, to be born. It intrinsically implies a link by blood. A nation in a real sense is an extended family. The merging process by which all nations are created is not merely cultural, but to a considerable extent biological, through intermarriage.

American political discourse on this point is culturally deprived by two difficulties. One is semantic. American editors are convinced that the term "state" will confuse readers unless reserved exclusively for the component parts of the U.S.—New York, California and so on. To describe sovereign political structures, where the British would use "state," the Germans *Staat*, and the French *l'etat*, American writers are compelled to use the word "nation." Thus in the late 1980s, it was common to see the American media referring to "the nation of Yugoslavia," when Yugoslavia's problem was precisely that it was not a nation at all, but a state that contained several small but very fierce nations.

(In my constructive way, I've been trying to introduce an alternative: the word "polity" — defined by Webster as a "politically-organized unit." But it's quite hopeless. Editors always confuse it with "policy." I've also tried "country," which is sometimes an alternative in British English. But they seem to think that's a type of music.)

The second difficulty hampering American discourse is perceptual. Americans are used to being told that they are a "nation of immigrants." They therefore tend to assume that they cannot share a common ethnic heritage. But even on its own term, this is false — at least, it was false until the great wave of Third World immigration unleashed by the

1965 Immigration Act. At the time of the American Revolution, the white population in the U.S. was 60 percent English, 80 percent British, 98 percent Protestant. As late as 1980, it was estimated that the U.S. population would still have been about half its then-current level if there had been *no immigration at all after 1790*. And in 1980, nearly 90 percent of the American population was European, the great bulk of it closely related, from the British Isles, Germany and Italy.

More importantly, however, the fact is that all nations are nations of immigrants. In no known case have the inhabitants sprouted out of the ground. The melting-pot process that produced the American nation is no different from that which produced all the great nations of Europe. The placenames around my mother's home in the north of England reflect the presence of five different language groups, going back over two thousand years. What distinguishes the American nation is not the way in which it was created, but the extraordinary speed.

## Nation-State: Modern Reactions

So a nation is the interlacing of ethnicity and culture. And a nation-state is its political expression. Let me now give two distinguished reactions to this phenomenon, which I think epitomize the two opposing poles of modern sentiment.

The first reaction is French-Canadian — from Pierre Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada almost continuously from 1968 to 1983, the architect of the modern Canadian state (...polity), and probably the greatest leader Canada has produced this century. Let me expand on that: He had to be great to get away with so many stupid things.

To appreciate Trudeau's position, you have to understand that he was and is a very peculiar man. He is a *Quebecois*, that is, a product of the French-speaking province (and emergent nation-state) of Quebec. But he is also a man of the left — much further left, indeed, than has been generally appreciated. As a leftist, his conscious ideology had no place for nationalism: the workers of the world were supposed to unite, dammit! And there was a

further factor. To be on the extreme left in French-speaking Quebec in the 1940s, when the province was totally dominated by the Catholic Church and the authoritarian nationalist *Union Nationale* government of Maurice Duplessis, was a very uncomfortable experience. And it produced in Trudeau a special case of a disease, a neurosis, widespread in the Western world today: an absolutely reflexive horror and fear of nationalist sentiment, which he still seems to view as clerical fascism.

This is how he put it in his early collection of essays, *Federalism and the French Canadians*:

*The road to progress lies through international integration; nationalism will have to be abandoned as a rustic and clumsy tool...*

He described his vision of a bilingual, bicultural Canada which would simultaneously be the political expression of both English and French as:

*...a brilliant prototype for [the] molding of tomorrow's civilization...*

And in a speech before the U.S. Congress, implicitly appealing for help after Quebec had rejected his vision and elected a separatist government, he claimed that the break-up of Canada into its component nations would be:

*...a crime against the history of mankind...*

— an extraordinary claim given that it was an American President, Woodrow Wilson, who in effect invented self-determination and imposed it on the dubious European Great Powers at Versailles in 1919.

Note the quaint but telling streak of *Internationale*-style emotionalism and imagery running through these comments. And, in particular, the antithesis Trudeau posits between "progress" and the "rustic" tool of nationalism. It's reminiscent of the passage in *The Communist Manifesto* where Marx and Engels take a moment off from bashing the beastly bourgeoisie to congratulate them for at least rescuing the proletariat from what they described succinctly as "rural idiocy." And it's highly significant. Because it epitomizes a key assumption: that nationalism is pre-modern—that with the spread of education and enlightenment, it must disappear. I will return to this point later.

---

***"For example, [Trudeau's] imposition of official bilingualism ...showed simply no awareness of the profound role language plays in shaping culture and identity."***

---

Incidentally, the idea that Trudeau was an anti-nationalist is probably news to some of you in the

audience. His image, especially in the U.S., was often that of a "Canadian Nationalist" and an anti-American. The essential explanation bears directly on the current U.S. political scene: Canadian leftists realized early that to sell socialism they were going to have to dress it up as something else. As one of them, Mel Watkins, put it: "Radicalism in Canada has to mean nationalism." Equally, of course, the American Left has now adroitly dropped efficiency arguments for government intervention and switched to equity arguments, such as the need to redress gender and race prejudice. The disease has changed, but the prescription remains the same: government intervention, directed by them. And if you look closely at the Canadian state (...polity) designed by Pierre Trudeau, essentially artificial and bearing so many similarities to the European Community's attempt to legislate a "European" identity, you find a nationality-free leftist fantasia. For example, his imposition of official bilingualism, which meant the federal government and as many other institutions as it could browbeat had to operate in both English and French, showed simply no awareness of the profound role language plays in shaping culture and identity. It made characteristically left-wing assumptions about the malleability of human beings. It had wholly unexpected radical and regressive public-choice consequences. Of course, it was extremely expensive and impractical, there being very few bilinguals in Canada. But we expect that of left-wing panaceas. And it failed. The two language communities in Canada are continuing to separate themselves, the Anglophones being helped out of Quebec by twenty years of ethnic-cleansing legislation passed by both the separatist and nominally federalist provincial governments.

Now at this point, I'm going to proceed on the journalistic theory that an anecdote is worth a lot of words. There's a very significant passage in the novel *Two Solitudes*, which is one of the most famous artifacts of this artificial "Canadian Nationalism," written by Hugh MacLennan, one of the Grand Old Men of Canadian Nationalism, who (naturally) turns out to have flirted with Communism in the 1930s. MacLennan is a real party-line Canadian Nationalist and I'm sure would be highly annoyed by the use to which I put his work. But that's what happens to you when you write books. The title, by the way, refers to the mutual isolation that prevailed between English and French in Canada, which MacLennan, writing in 1945, felt should be broken down. And I think that in this passage he did achieve true artistic insight, which Plato assures us in one of his Socratic dialogues is unrelated to intelligence. It's a very dramatic and moving passage. [See the side bar.]

It's the fourth year of World War I, and an English-speaking girl is picking up her mail at a French-owned store in deepest rural Quebec. And she sees an

envelope marked OHMS (On His Majesty's Service). Instantly she knows what it is: notification that her husband has been killed at the front. The French storekeeper and his crony see that she has gone into shock and they guess what has happened. They rush to help her, bring her water, a chair, anything. But she rebuffs them. She's telling herself not to lose control. She keeps affirming that she's all right. Finally, she makes it out the door. The *Quebecois* shake their heads. "And she didn't cry," they say. "Well, maybe she doesn't know how. You can't tell about the English."

It was a day in early July when Janet Methuen stood in Polycarpe Drouin's store with a letter in her hand from His Majesty the King, via the Canadian Ministry of Defence. She read it through, and when she had finished she lifted her head and looked around the store, seeing nothing. She began to walk forward and bumped into the side of the Percheron model, her arms hanging at her sides, the letter in one hand and the envelope in the other.

Drouin came from behind the counter. His voice was soft and kind, his face wrinkled, his eyes friendly. "You are all right, Madame?"

Janet turned her head rigidly and saw his tap-like nose and the wrinkles about his eyes blur and then water into focus. She saw him look at the letter in her hand and immediately she lifted her chin. She was as pale as unbleached muslin.

"I get you a drink, maybe?" Drouin said.

She heard her own voice, like a scratchy phonograph in another room, "I'm quite all right, thank you," she repeated tonelessly.

Her mind kept repeating a phrase she had read months before in a magazine story: "I mustn't let people see it ... I mustn't let..." The words jabbered in her mind like the speech of an idiot.

Drouin looked sideways at the only other person in the store, a farmer who had come in to buy some tar-paper. Their eyes met and both men nodded. The farmer had also seen the long envelope with O.H.M.S. [On His Majesty's Service] in one corner.

"Get a chair, Jacques," Drouin said in French.

"The lady wants to sit down." But before the man could get one to her, Janet went to the door and went out. The silence in her wake was broken as the chair hit the floor. Drouin shook his head and went around the counter. "That's a terrible thing," he said.

"Her husband, maybe?"

"The old captain says her husband is overseas."

The farmer scratched his head. "When I saw that letter this morning," Drouin went on, "I said to my wife, that's a bad thing, a letter like that. You never hear anything good from the government in Ottawa, I said."

The farmer was still scratching his head, "And she didn't cry," he said. "Well, maybe she doesn't know how."

Drouin bent forward over the counter in his usual jack-knife position, his chin on the heel of his hand. After a time he said, "You can't tell about the English. But maybe the old captain will be hurt bad," he added, as though he had just thought of it.

— *The Two Solitudes* by Hugh MacLennan  
(Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1972)

To any WASP, of course, this girl's reaction is perfectly normal. What MacLennan is tapping into here is the fact that cultural attitudes to things like bereavement differ profoundly and persistently, much more so than is often realized. And these differences result in incomprehension and sometimes in serious conflict. Which is why the nation-state, where everyone understands each other, is an efficient way of organizing human beings. In economists' jargon, they have lower transaction costs.

But there's a second point. MacLennan has the storekeeper say to his crony:

*When I saw that letter this morning, I said to my wife, that's a bad thing, a letter like that. You never hear anything good from the government in Ottawa, I said.*

This is the genuine voice of pre-modern Quebec. And Quebec, really until the 1960s, was pre-modern. Goldwin Smith compared it to a frozen mammoth preserved in the tundra. Louis-Joseph Papineau, who led an unsuccessful rebellion against British rule, provided a classic description of this pre-modern way of life in the 1830s:

*Our people don't want English capital nor English people here, — they have no ambition beyond their present possessions and never want to go beyond the sound of their own church bells.*

The crucial point about a modern society is that it is held together from top to bottom by information flows. In pre-modern societies, frozen mammoths can slumber peacefully. Ethnic groups can coexist because they rarely have to deal with each other. But in modern societies, there are too many points of contact. When people do start to hear something good from their government, in the form of services, or even to hear from it at all, it starts to matter in what language it speaks to them. And in fact one of the first signs that Quebec nationalism was getting assertive was a demand that Federal government pension checks should be bilingual. Ottawa's envelopes don't say OHMS any more, and not only because English Canadian leftists are writing the Queen out of Canada's history just as Columbus has been written out of America's.

## **Nation-State: A Modern Invention**

So here we reach my first conclusion: *the nation-state is a product of modernization*. It's far from being a "rustic tool." After all, most nation-states emerged only in relatively recent times — Italy being a case in point. Most human historical experience has been in multiethnic states (...polities) — but they have also been primitive, and tyrannies.

I think, in fact, that the emergence of the nation-state on the world scene is quite analogous to the

simultaneous emergence of the corporation in the development of capitalist economies. Both can be traced to lower transaction costs, efficiencies in the transmission of information and the superior economies of specialization.

---

***"Nothing can touch the explicitly anti-nationalist ideology of Marxism in terms of sheer murderousness."***

---

Indeed, this analogy can be carried further. In a developed economy, it is not necessary for individual firms to be vertically integrated — that is, baked bean companies don't have to grow their own beans and operate their own tin mines. All these functions can be performed by specialists, who contract with each other and jointly create the end product. Similarly, in an environment of free trade and freedom from security threat, even quite small entities are viable sovereign states (...polities). They don't need actually to possess warm-water ports, food and fuel supplies, captive markets and all the other traditional preoccupations of mercantilist empires.

In other words, now that Canada has the Free Trade Agreement with the U.S., it's an open question whether provinces like Alberta and British Columbia, both bigger than New Zealand, really need to stay in Confederation. In Europe, with free trade and the collapse of the Soviet Union, who needs Brussels?

It's interesting to note, however, that the U.S. does not seem to be troubled by the sort of regional or subnational secessionist tendencies that we see in Italy and Canada, although there are local-level secessionist movements within, for example, California and New York City. I think this can be attributed to four conditions, each necessary but not sufficient: first, the U.S. works economically, whereas Italian and Canadian regions might quite reasonably think they could do better than the central government; second, the U.S. has a real federalism, which protects the interests of the regions from the demands of the metropolitan center; third and fourth, the U.S. has linguistic and cultural unity — for the moment.

For, if the nation-state is a product of modernization, there's also a corollary: *modernization puts a premium on linguistic unity*. Open societies are held together by information flows. Anything that impedes those information flows renders them less efficient.

So why is the nation-state in disrepute? One conventional explanation is that nationalism leads to wars, above all World War I — the disaster from which we are only now recovering. But actually the religious wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were just as devastating — and did cause a

reaction against religion, to which the nation-state was seen as an antidote. Similarly, Robert Conquest demonstrated thirty years ago, and is now being magnificently vindicated, that nothing can touch the explicitly anti-nationalist ideology of Marxism in terms of sheer murderousness. The lesson of history is simply that human beings like war. They will always find an excuse for it.

The key to the contemporary campaign against the nation-state is sociological: the rise of what Irving Kristol has called "The New Class." These are the professionals who run and benefit from the state (...polity) and its power to tax: the bureaucracy; the educational establishment; the media elite, which interlocks with both; and all their various client constituencies, to whom they channel tax monies. The emergence of this class, financially supported by capitalism but alienated from it, was predicted by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter. It is a phenomenon at least as significant as the emergence of the proletariat two centuries earlier.

## The Nation-State and The "New Class"

So this is my second conclusion: *the New Class dislikes the nation-state*. It dislikes the nation-state for exactly the same reason that it dislikes the free market: both are machines that run of themselves with no need for New Class-directed government intervention. Additionally, all self-respecting elites want to distinguish themselves from the peasants. If the peasants are innocently patriotic, the elite will favor a knowing internationalism. And finally, the self-interest of this New Class *is* internationalism: co-operation with the New Classes of other countries above the heads of their populations.

This was brought home to me when I attended a European Council meeting — the name given for the meeting of political heads of the European Community countries. This was in Strasbourg. The meetings were in private, but nevertheless some 3,000 journalists were there, a great sea of them eating catered European Community lunches off china plates with red and white wine — no styrofoam cups of coffee and sticky Danish pastries — and all discussing which restaurant they would favor with their expense accounts that night. And there are four of these things a year. What a boondoggle! And how easy to rationalize with ringing Europhoria!

Just as the European Community represents the New Class collaborating over the head of the several nations, so the Canadian Confederation is now just New Class collaboration over the head of at least two nations and a number of increasingly distinct sections. In fact, the two structures are (or aim to be) remarkably similar, right down to an inappropriate monetary union balanced by massive transfer

payments. And, of course, problems with grass roots revolts.

It's interesting to see one way in which the Canadian New Class is coping with this problem of a revolting electorate. At one point, pressure from the Western provinces has forced Ottawa to concede, at least in principle, an elected Senate. But there is talk that proportions of these Senators will have to come from favored factions — women, "native peoples," etc. Of course, in the U.S. the Democratic Party already selects its Presidential nomination convention delegates in this way. It's a direct imposition of New Class values upon the electorate — what Indonesia's dictator Sukarno used to call "guided democracy."

And this brings us full circle, to the U.S., where intervening on behalf of an increasing list of such favored factions, now extended to include animals and vegetables, has brought federal, state and local government presence to record levels at the very moment when socialism has collapsed in the rest of the world.

## The Nation-State and Immigration

It also brings me to my third conclusion: *immigration is potentially much more of a threat to public order than we realize*.

I self-consciously call attention here to my *National Review* cover story of June 22, 1992, entitled "Rethinking Immigration." A key point in my analysis was that the extensive academic literature that seeks to account for economic growth has generally concluded that increases in labor and capital together account for less than half, and sometimes as little as 10 percent, of increases in national output. The rest is due to ideas — better ways of working. This is obvious when you consider the tremendous post-World War II growth of Japan, which has had no immigration at all. In other words, immigration is a luxury for the developed world, not a necessity — particularly the kind of unskilled immigration which the U.S., by a sort of political accident, began to accept after the immigration reform of 1965.

---

***"The impact of this new immigration is only just beginning to be realized. ...introducing diverse populations strikes at the nation-state's Achilles heel: its need for homogeneity."***

---

Clearly, we are now in an era of international migrations of almost unprecedented proportions — comparable, perhaps, to the *Volkwanderung* of the fifth century, when the territories of the former Roman Empire were invaded and transformed by German

tribes. The combination of the Third World's demographic overhang and the falling real cost of travel is profoundly destabilizing.

The impact of this new immigration is only just beginning to be realized. In the U.S., for example, the proportion of whites in the population has fallen from nearly 90 percent in 1960 to 73 percent, arguably less, in thirty years. It's easy to construct scenarios where whites will be a minority well within the lifetime of my American son, aged thirteen months. And this is entirely the result of public policy. When I mentioned this in *The National Review* article, someone wrote in and accused me of trying to maintain "Euro-American racial hegemony." Of course, thirty years ago what he meant by "Euro-American" was covered by another word, "American."

From the point of view of the West's New Classes, immigration is manna from heaven. It gives them endless excuses to intervene in society, and it enables them to distinguish themselves from the xenophobic masses.

But introducing diverse populations strikes at the nation-state's Achilles heel: its need for homogeneity. In fact, on the analysis I have presented here, the very concept of a multicultural and multiracial nation is suspect. In essence, it is a contradiction in terms. Of course, nations do contain contradictions, particularly given time to digest them — and American immigration history, incidentally, has been marked by many such pauses for digestion. But mostly, multicultural and multiracial polities are not nations: they are states, empires. And they are not democratic.

And the question is: Why; why all this immigration? What is the purpose of this change? I pointed out just now that there is no economic necessity for it. You have to make a positive political argument.

Pierre Trudeau, as we have seen, did have a positive political argument. It was crazy, but it was an argument. He actually believed in the abolition of national sentiment.

But — and here I come to the other pole of modern sentiment — it's worth considering what Alexander Solzhenitsyn said on the subject in his Nobel Prize speech. Solzhenitsyn, remember, actually grew up under and went to war to defend an explicit-ly anti-national ideology. His language is religious, but it could just as easily be moral or scientific.

*The disappearance of nations would impoverish us no less than if all peoples were made alike, with one character, one face. Nations are the wealth of mankind; they are its generalized personalities: the smallest of them has its own particular colors and embodies a particular facet of God's design.* ■