
Pan-Canadian nationalism since 1867: precarious nation-building revisited in light of the writings of George Grant and Eric Hobsbawm

*Le nationalisme pancanadien depuis 1867 : une construction nationale fragile
réinterprétée à la lumière des écrits de George Grant et Eric Hobsbawm*

Andrew Ives



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Pan-Canadian nationalism since 1867: precarious nation-building revisited in light of the writings of George Grant and Eric Hobsbawm

Andrew IVES
Université de Caen Normandie

The author here proposes a broad study of pan-Canadian nationalism that demonstrates, first, that economic forces were the dominant structuring element in the nation-building narrative, thereby reinforcing the neo-Marxist theses of Eric Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner. Secondly, the article revisits the thesis presented in George Grant's seminal work *Lament for a Nation*, and concludes that his writing on pan-Canadian nationalism was remarkably premonitory.

Cet article propose un retour sur le nationalisme pancanadien dans ses grandes lignes qui démontrera dans un premier temps que les forces économiques ont toujours été l'élément structurant du nationalisme canadien, renforçant ainsi les thèses néo-marxistes d'Eric Hobsbawm et Ernest Gellner. Ensuite l'auteur revisite la thèse présentée par George Grant dans son livre influent *Lament for a Nation*, et tire la conclusion que ses écrits sur les limites du nationalisme pancanadien sont remarquablement prémonitoires.

This paper will begin by defining some terms and then will undertake a wide scope study of the nationalism that has structured the Canadian nation-building project, seen here as one example of what Michael Hechter has called "state-building nationalism" (HECHTER 2000: 56-69), or what John Breuilly describes as "the intertwined histories of nationalism and state-building" (BREUILLY 2013:10). English-speaking Canadians have led the way in developing this form of nationalism in the service of a state-building project, but, since the 1960s, they have employed an inclusive strategy and tried to integrate French-speaking Canadians into the project, which explains why the current is more correctly referred to as *Pan-Canadian nationalism*, rather than English-Canadian nationalism.

One of the central features of this particular nation-building project is that it has been structured from within its geopolitical position as a satellite to an imperialist power. The recognition of this position fifty years ago led the Canadian political philosopher George Grant to adopt a melancholic tone, lamenting the impossibility of true nationhood for his homeland. A half century later the present author will revisit Grant's premonitions and his ultimate conclusion, namely that the liberal individualism at the heart of pan-Canadian nationalism bore the seeds of its demise. Grant was remarkably clairvoyant, and it will be shown here, that although he could not have predicted the actual process of demise, the basic schema of development he feared is in the process

Andrew IVES

of bearing itself out. This is primarily due to Canada's tragic position as a satellite nation; in gaining full independence from the British Empire in 1931, it simply moved more firmly into a new role of satellite in the nascent American Empire. The danger inherent in this new geopolitical reality was only fully recognized in the 1960s; the new pan-Canadian nationalist discourse that appeared at this time can thus be seen as a response to two direct threats to the Canadian nation-building project, namely American continental domination and the burgeoning *Québécois* independence movement.

In the Pierre Trudeau era pan-Canadian nationalism took hold and, in many ways, it transformed the country; many of the features associated with the contemporary Canadian identity can be traced to this formative period. However, the conservative George Grant was not satisfied; he suggested that the new nationalism was superficial because it was founded on a complete acceptance of the dominant ideology that structured the imperialist empire to the South, and he disparagingly referred to the Liberal Party's political project as amounting to little more than obtaining the status of "junior partner" in an imperial project.

This article will argue that Grant's analysis was perspicacious and foreshadowed the Neo-Marxist critiques of Eric Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner. This line of argument will lead us to suggest that Grant's premonitory fears for Canadian nationhood have become particularly acute in the contemporary neoliberal era due to the threat that globalized neoliberalism poses to regional particularisms. As Grant had foreseen, Trudeau's pan-Canadian nationalism has allowed a smooth transition to contemporary neoliberalism, which has accentuated the continental pull. And, again as Grant had foreseen, there is no longer any meaningful resistance to continental integration. In other words, English Canadian nationalism was constructed on shaky ideological foundations, foundations that leave its national project little more than an empty shell useful to capitalist development. George Grant's lament appears in retrospect as premonitory, or as Northrop Frye once said, Canada has moved from a pre-national to a post-national state without ever having become a nation.

Theoretical approaches to nationalism

Historically, Canada has been a vehicle for resource extraction and liberal capitalist acquisitive conquest. A country that develops on this vision has insufficient resources for the romantic nationhood of Ernest Renan. As such, Canadian nationalism lends itself more easily to the analyses of Eric Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner in which "the nation" simply facilitates

PAN-CANADIAN NATIONALISM SINCE 1867: PRECARIOUS NATION-BUILDING
REVISITED IN LIGHT OF THE WRITINGS OF GEORGE GRANT AND ERIC HOBSBAWM

processes of capitalist accumulation. Modern multicultural Canada, while presenting a progressive and open face to the world, does not seem to offer its citizens a collective shared desire to build a unique society in the northern half of the continent. Instead it presents the ideal of the global village of individual opportunities. In a nutshell: in keeping with Grant's conclusions, we will argue that a country structured around an ideology of liberal individualism within an economic environment of globalized free markets cannot sustain a national project.

What is a nation? And what is nationalism? If we can answer these general questions we can then start to look at how to apply these definitions to Canada, and more specifically to the English Canadian variant since 1867. The problem, of course, for a short paper, is that providing the definitions is not straightforward. Hugh Seton-Watson, author of *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the origins of nations and the politics of nationalism*, a book that another specialist, Benedict Anderson, calls "by far the best and most comprehensive English-Language text on nationalism," (ANDERSON 1991: 5) remarks: "I am driven to the conclusion that no "scientific definition" of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists" (SETON-WATSON 1977: 5). We need read no further than the first page of *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* by E.J. Hobsbawm to find another confounded specialist: "This term [nation] appears to represent something important in human affairs. But what exactly? Here lies the mystery" (HOBSBAWM 1990: 1). Hobsbawm goes on to quote the famous 19th century historian and British constitutional expert, Walter Bagehot, who says "We know what it is when you do not ask us, but we cannot very quickly explain or define it." (HOBSBAWM 1990: 1)

A common sense view would contend that "nation" is a term applied to a group of people living in a recognised, definable territory. This implies defining the group of people as well as the territory, although the two phenomena - a people and a recognized territory - do not necessarily coincide. If we put aside the question of territory and concentrate on the social group, traditional views of the nation look for definable shared cultural traits that produce a collective group identity, such as a common language, a common religion, shared folklore, and a shared historical narrative.

Immediately we see that if these criteria for a nation are retained, the Canadian nation-building project has always been a challenge. Historically the country was created on a territory stolen from the Native peoples, who they themselves did not share a common language or culture. Even if we neglect the origins of conquest and limit our enquiry to the European invaders who

Andrew IVES

colonised and now control the northern half of North America, from a historic point of view we are confronted with a nation founded by two distinct settler groups: French-speaking Catholics and English-speaking Protestants. What's more, each of these two puts forward its own historical narrative. The official multicultural policy of contemporary Canada loosens the sense of unity even more, not only due to the multitude of "heritage languages" and the desire to respect and promote cultural diversity, but mainly due to the negation of the historic bicultural reality of the European founding colonists that is inherent in multiculturalism. We could add that multiculturalism also carries with it an attitude of cultural relativity that denies full recognition of the legitimacy of the native peoples' claim to the land.

And yet in spite of these observations, the country's history lends itself to an analysis based on the concept of nation-building. Canadian politicians, intellectuals and artists have built up a national narrative that has buttressed a collective identity, and created a sense of belonging for citizens. Canadian intellectuals have seized on Ernest Renan's generous definition of the nation, a definition that provides an opening for a diverse country like Canada. For Renan, sharing a common language is not primordial, or to quote him directly: "il y a dans l'homme quelque chose de supérieur à la langue : c'est la volonté" (RENAN 1882: 19). Canada may lack cultural homogeneity, but can proclaim that it has constructed itself around its citizens' shared desire to live together. And clearly since the Dominion of 1867, and the Westminster Act of 1931, it has gradually built up a set of symbols of nationhood.

Canada, Inc. and the Marxist model of nationalism

Leaving aside the separate nationalist project of the Québécois, though we will come back to this separate theme in the conclusion, let's take a look at how the pan-Canadian nationalism has developed since 1867, focusing on how this project has been created in the geopolitical context of a satellite between two imperialist projects.

In spite of recent attempts to retroactively assign a nationalist reading to the War of 1812¹, the earliest formal attempts at nation-building begin with

¹ The government of Stephen Harper created a controversy over their handling of the bicentennial commemoration of the War of 1812. The initiative was criticized by some for what they considered as excessive spending in a period marked by austerity measures, but the main issue in public debate concerned the government's ostensible desire to elevate the status of the War and to retroactively grant it a role in the nation-building narrative. The episode is analyzed in Eric Weeks, "Forging an Identity in Bronze: Nation-Building through Ottawa's Memorial Landscape", *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies*, 78, 2015, 49-75.

PAN-CANADIAN NATIONALISM SINCE 1867: PRECARIOUS NATION-BUILDING
REVISITED IN LIGHT OF THE WRITINGS OF GEORGE GRANT AND ERIC HOBBSBAWM

the confederation process, the status of Dominion in 1867 and the national railway, which was an integral part of the whole process. The new nationalist project was dubbed the “national policy” by John A. Macdonald. This policy was structured around the imperial preference and a West-East trade route across Canada and then across the Atlantic. It placed the “national” project within the strict limits of development within the British Empire. This policy was already structured as a means of resistance to American annexation, though this second geopolitical reality had not yet reached the level of influence it would gain in the 20th century. Macdonald was followed by a subsequent influential Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, elected in 1896. In spite of the change in partisan control in Parliament and the Cabinet, and in spite of Laurier’s more acute desire for self-government for Canada, there was a basic continuity. What is particularly striking about the early nationalist project, whether led by the Conservative Party leader Macdonald or the Liberal Party’s Laurier, is to see how closely it fits the Marxist model of nationalism as a project meeting the needs of capitalist accumulation. The central government played the role of a company expanding its activities by developing resource extraction, and actively looking for labour to achieve its economic development objectives. In particular, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, *Canada, Inc.* needed to attract immigrant farmers willing to go west and develop cash crops for export.

The historical record corresponds perfectly to the work of Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm. For both thinkers, the real role of the Nation, and its corollary nationalism, is not to help individuals find a sense of meaning and fulfilment from within a collective sense of belonging, but instead to ensure existing power structures and future economic expansion within a capitalist mode of production. The ultimate determining factor is thus economic, not cultural. Gellner tries to prove to us that the creation of the concept of the nation is part of a wider process of capitalist expansion. Hobsbawm is even more convincing in reinforcing Gellner’s critique of nationalism when he shows that the very word “nation” in its modern usage is an invention of the 19th century; it must be seen as a modern concept created in order to meet the needs of modern industrial society (HOBBSBAWM 1990: 5-8). Hobsbawm provides a schematic chronology with nation/nationalism existing in a prototype form in the post-French revolution era, becoming a dominant idea in the late 19th century and reaching its apogee before and just after the Second World War. He even predicts its future demise in the face of the forces of apparent globalisation. In the same line of thought, Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities*, comments “Minerva’s owl flies at dusk”

Andrew IVES

(ANDERSON 1991: 5) when noting that the keen academic interest in nationalism comes at a time when the concept may have outlived its usefulness.²

The analyses of Gellner and Hobsbawm have much in common. The major difference between the two is in terms of disciplinary approach: Hobsbawm was a historian while Gellner was a sociologist and philosopher. Gellner's discussion of nationalism, like Hobsbawm's, presents a very different picture from that of Ernest Renan. Gellner rejects the romantic common culture vision to focus on the needs of the modern State; he goes on to conclude that the modern State needs nationalism to survive. Modern capitalism needs a well-trained adaptable work force. In the early stages of the industrial revolution, mechanisation required specialisation of the work force. But as time went on, the rate of technological change required the work force to be constantly able to adapt. To be well trained, citizens need to have access to a solid high quality educational system; to be flexible and mobile, they need to broadly share a common high culture (GELLNER 1983: 8-14). Nationalism responds to both requirements: it creates a common high culture and with it a sense of pride and belonging, and this in turn inspires citizens to support state initiatives in financing and organising a common curriculum and a national school system. Nationalism is also important at times when competition for resources produce armed conflicts and require citizens to join the war effort. To sum up, the modern tendency towards cultural standardisation and homogeneity is due to economic forces. And the matrix for cultural standardisation is the nation. This viewpoint takes out the romantic sentimental attachment to nationhood and makes the nation little more than an agent for stimulating economic growth.

When studying the narrative of Canadian nation building, Gellner and Hobsbawm's analyses seem more and more pertinent; it would be hard to deny that the desire to create a nation has gone hand in hand with the desire to exploit the country's resources profitably. Even today's multicultural model can be interpreted from within the Marxist model of economic forces: multiculturalism seems to correspond to the next wave of capitalist expansion: globalised markets and the post national world.

² Canada may well be a prototype for a coming post-national era, but we lack the historical distance needed to pronounce on this hypothesis.

Pan-Canadian nationalism in the shadow of the American empire: the triumph of liberal individualism

Let's return to our historical look at pan-Canadian nationalism. In the Laurier era, a competing nationalist project was presented by the French Canadian Henri Bourassa. His project was very different and involved severing the ties to British imperialism, and encouraging French and English-speaking Canadians to join together in a truly independent bilingual and bicultural national project. Bourassa clearly was ahead of his time. The élite in English Canada had not yet advanced in their reflexion beyond membership in the imperial project and were certainly not ready to envisage an equal partnership for French Catholics. As such, Bourassa's nationalist project attracted little support outside of his home province.

Bourassa's basic idea of an alliance between French and English Canadians to create a bicultural nation-state, however, was taken up by English Canadian nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s, albeit with significant modifications. Before looking at the fundamental difference between Bourassa's bicultural nationalism, and Pierre Trudeau's minority language protection model, it is important to point out that the new pan-Canadian nationalism was constructed in the context of growing dependence with regard to the American neighbour. It was a reaction against the potential loss of sovereignty and against the threat of becoming a subservient satellite; in short, the whole movement came into being as a reaction against the danger of American economic and political domination. During the 1962-63 defence crisis, John Diefenbaker took on a defiant stance in defence of Canadian sovereignty. The crisis began when Kennedy complained about insufficient support from Canada during Cuban missiles crisis. The rift widened when Diefenbaker refused to accept nuclear warheads as part of the NORAD continental defense system. During the subsequent election campaign, he lost support in public opinion due to his perceived lack of loyalty to the American ally. However, in spite of the changeover from Conservative to Liberal government, it was in the following years that we see the rise of awareness of the excessive level of foreign investment in Canada, and a retroactive recognition of Diefenbaker's legitimate fear for Canadian sovereignty. Walter Gordon and Mel Watkins, two of the key figures in the economic nationalism movement, managed to become influential in the Trudeau years, the years in which the new brand of pan-Canadian nationalism took off, inspiring new initiatives such as the Foreign Investment Review Agency (FIRA) or the National Energy Programme (NEP).

Andrew IVES

Integration of the French fact became a necessary ingredient in this new nationalist project. Certainly it cannot be denied that the desire to integrate Québec into the nascent pan-Canadian nationalism was a reaction and a reply to the Quiet Revolution in Québec. But it is important to note that, even without Québécois nationalism, English Canada needed the French Canadians on-board if their project were to be viable. This can be shown in Grant's common sense analysis presented in *Lament for a Nation* in 1965:

The keystone of a Canadian nation is the French fact, the slightest knowledge of history makes this platitudinous. English-speaking Canadians who desire the survival of their nation have to cooperate with those who seek the continuance of Franco-American civilization (GRANT 1965: 20).

Grant was a conservative who greatly admired Charles de Gaulle, but the same conclusion was reached by left-leaning nationalists who feared American domination: without Québec, both demographically and economically, the country could never face up to the American challenge. Québec's geographic position separating the Maritimes from the rest of English speaking Canada was of course another major concern.

The Trudeau years were marked by the new pan-Canadian nationalism and a series of measures designed to limit American control over the economy. As a corollary to the policy of gaining control of its economy and developing initiatives to develop more value added manufacturing instead of exporting raw materials, Trudeau also implemented official bilingualism, and tried to inspire French Canadians from Québec to join the nation-building project. This was reminiscent of Bourassa's bicultural nationalist project from the early 20th century. However Trudeau's and Bourassa's visions of partnership were strikingly different. Trudeau proposed bilingualism in federal jurisdictions and minority language protection, which was a far cry from Bourassa's partnership of two peoples. Trudeau's policy was fundamentally liberal; it conceived of society as a collection of individuals endowed with free will and in competition one against the other. Trudeau's policy initiative did not recognize the Québécois as a people, but instead he hoped to protect the language rights of individuals who happened to speak French.

This is just one illustration of the liberal individualism that has structured English-Canadian nationalism. Not only is the ideology structured around a denial of collective rights in favour of individual rights, but it goes hand in hand with economic liberalism. The liberal pan-Canadian agenda was

PAN-CANADIAN NATIONALISM SINCE 1867: PRECARIOUS NATION-BUILDING
REVISITED IN LIGHT OF THE WRITINGS OF GEORGE GRANT AND ERIC HOBBSBAWM

particularly favourable to the Canadian capitalist class, but more importantly it met the needs of multinationals. In any event, as George Grant pointed out a half century ago, a capitalist class in a satellite nation will be loyal to the imperial seat of power, not to the satellite: “our ruling class is composed of the same groups as that of the United States, with the signal difference that the Canadian ruling class looks across the border for its final authority” (Grant 1965: 9).

Brian Mulroney’s Conservative Party government, elected in 1984, acted immediately to create closer relations with the United States, and do away with any vexations suffered during the Trudeau era. Notably, the Mulroney government did away with the economic nationalism measures limiting foreign investment, and cancelled the NEP. They went on to negotiate a Free Trade agreement in 1989 (precursor to the future NAFTA signed in 1993). All that was left of Trudeau’s pan-Canadian nationalism were the symbols of nationhood: individuals choosing freely to wave red and white flags. English Canada has fallen into the trap announced and analysed by Gellner/Hobsbawm: its nationalism can clearly be seen as a veneer that serves the interest of capitalist accumulation. This has become even clearer in the age of neoliberalism, an ideology that arrived with Thatcher and Reagan, and has imposed itself in Canada and around the world since. Not only does this model of political economy put its faith in the efficiency of the unhindered free market, but neoliberal ideologues go further and wish to apply the liberal ideal of competition to areas that were hitherto not subject to the rules of the competitive free market, notably in the field of education, which is a domain of key importance in nurturing a nationalist sentiment. Paul Treanor, a recognized expert on neoliberalism, notes that in this philosophy, “every human being is an entrepreneur managing their own life, and should act as such” (TREANOR 2005). Without pushing our analysis any further, it can immediately be seen that the neoliberal market model of society represents the anti-thesis of economic nationalism. Not only does it take away the means for a nation-state to make economic choices through regulatory measures and direct investment, but it weakens the sense of belonging of the individual citizen.

Conclusion

Canadian nation-building has been carried out in the shadow of two Empires and this geopolitical reality has made any nationalist project in the northern half of North America precarious. Building a national project in this context would have required a strong will amongst the people to resist imperial hegemony, but this has been lacking in English Canada. In particular the

Andrew IVES

ideological compatibility with the American republic has condemned meaningful nationalism in English-speaking Canada. The drab form of nationalism that has accompanied the “nation-building” narrative has simply facilitated capitalist accumulation and resource extraction, in line with the writing about nationalism by Marxist thinkers Gellner and Hobsbawm. As George Grant suggested a half century ago, the only hope for Canadian nationalism was to finally latch on to Henri Bourassa’s bicultural project from the early 20th century in order to actively resist the danger Bourassa called “*l’Américanisme saxonisant*.” But this option has not been pursued by English Canadian leaders. In the age of imperial preference, they seem to have been convinced of the desirability of the assimilation of the French-speaking minority. In the 1960s and 1970s, the pan-Canadian project did indeed pay special interest to French Canada centered in the province of Québec. However, the conscious decision by Trudeau and the Liberal Party to propose a form of nationalism grounded on individual rights, one that recognized individuals who speak French rather than a Québécois people, has led to its downfall. In Quebec, citizens have thus followed a separate trajectory and there the national question is still on the table. Quebecers will likely be asked again to decide whether they wish to blend into the neoliberal continental unit that pan-Canadian nationalists have been proposing since the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, or if they wish to resuscitate René Levesque’s “*projet de société*” and build something different. Given the recent history and the contemporary debate in English Canada, it is hard to imagine English Canadians offering anything more than free market prosperity in response to Quebecers’ dream of nationhood. This is a shame, for as Renan remarked long ago: “*la communauté des intérêts fait des traités de commerce. Il y a dans la nationalité un côté de sentiment*” (RENAN 1882: 24).

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PAN-CANADIAN NATIONALISM SINCE 1867: PRECARIOUS NATION-BUILDING
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