



In praise of Ontario

They say that there are only two types of Canadians: those who live in Toronto, and those who hate Toronto. Yet one of my great discoveries, since first moving to this city over eight years ago, is that these sorts of exaggerated claims are not entirely true. Many of the people who live in Toronto also hate it.

Having been born and raised out west, I initially regarded Toronto as the epicentre of evil in the country. Living in Montreal for a decade did little to change this, other than adding a layer of snobbish disdain to my underlying loathing. The Toronto of my imagination became not only a soulless, self-important city full of bankers and bagmen, but one where you couldn't even find a decent croissant.

Since moving to Toronto, however, I have come to develop a somewhat begrudging respect, not just for the city itself, but for the entire province of Ontario.

First of all, there is the fact that the people of Ontario saved our bacon — once again — in the last federal election. While it is a testament to the openness of our political system that someone with as intellectual a temperament as Stephen Harper could come close to winning real political power, it is scary to think that we almost had Stockwell Day as our minister of foreign affairs.

The failure of Ontarians to warm to the new Conservative Party is part of a more general pattern. I have found that voters in Ontario seem to be the only ones who feel any responsibility for the country as a whole when they go to the polls.

I thought it was highly revealing, in the 1997 election campaign, that the Reform Party blew their chances in Ontario by airing a series of anti-

Quebec ads. Few people stopped to ask why this should have hurt them so much in Ontario, and not in other provinces. The answer I think is clear. People in Ontario are actually committed to making this country work. They consider it part of their responsibility as citizens to get along with Quebec, in a way that most other Canadians do not.

Thus Ontarians are less likely to engage in puerile “protest” voting, and more likely to support parties that are actually fit to govern the nation.

Part of this no doubt has to do with the number of people who live in Ontario. Canadians out west are used to being outvoted in federal elections. This seems to have encouraged a culture of irresponsible voting. How else to explain the fact that provincial politics in BC and Alberta is so firmly lodged in the cracker barrel?

Maritime voters, on the other hand, can be relentlessly parochial in their concerns — such that small changes in entitlement programs are enough to generate massive swings in party affiliation.

And Quebec, as everyone knows, is in it for Quebec. In the middle of the election campaign, when the other leaders were falling over themselves to don Calgary Flames jerseys, Gilles Duceppe took the trouble to announce that he was cheering for the Tampa Bay Lightning.

So what does it all add up to? It leaves Ontario as the only province that is doing anything to make the country work.

There is another thing about Ontario that has come to impress me over the years. People in Ontario are not whiners. Maybe it's due to the British heritage of this province, a lega-

cy of the “stiff upper lip.” Maybe it's a sentiment of *noblesse oblige*. Regardless, there are only two provinces in this country that lose out, financially, from the system of interprovincial transfers — Ontario and Alberta. And unlike Alberta, where they simply dig it out of the ground, people in Ontario actually work for the money that gets transferred to the other provinces. Despite this, I have never heard a single person in this province complain about equalization. (Mike Harris grouched about it on one or two occasions, but then dropped it when he saw that the issue had no legs.) Compare that to the incessant whining we hear coming from Alberta.

Alberta, it should be noted, is a past recipient of equalization payments. But ever since the price of oil went north, support for the program has plummeted to the lowest level in the country. In Ontario, by contrast, which has never received equalization payments, support is astonishingly high. One survey in 2001 showed that support for equalization in Ontario was higher than in Quebec, and (even more preposterously) higher than in Newfoundland.

More and more, I have come to think that the virtues we associate with Canada — good government, political pragmatism, progressive social policies, and respect for pluralism — are first and foremost the virtues of Ontario. So what if the waiters in Toronto are insufferable. As long as they keep the wingnuts out of power, *je suis un Torontois*.

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