

# Great Canadian Question: Founding Concepts

**Title: Canada's Elusive Evolution**

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When I initially sat down to write a paper on the "founding concepts" of Canada, I thought it was going to be a piece of cake. "Come on," I thought to myself. "How complicated can the founding of a country be? You discover a piece of land, you plant a flag on it and you give it a name. *Voila*—a nation is born." Upon reading through the arguments presented by Mr. Cooper and Mr. Rae, though, I have been forced to examine the concept of nation-building in a way I never have before. Suffice it to say that my perspective has taken on a little more depth since the outset of this paper, and that Canada's founding has proven a far more complex process than I would ever have thought possible.

The United States, with its history of sensational revolution and larger-than-life founding fathers, has become somewhat of a poster child for the nation-founding process. A very brief examination of Canada's early history is enough to tell you that its journey into existence has been decidedly non-American. According to Cooper, the establishment of Canada differs from that of the US in three major ways: First of all, rather than having been established through the rejection of previously-established authority, Canada's system of government "devolved from the British crown." Secondly, Canada lacks the significant founding fathers so integral to the founding history of the US. Finally, Canada's formative history is void of the ideological by-products that typically accompany the founding process. It is by virtue of these dissimilarities to the US that Mr. Cooper puts forth a very gutsy assertion—namely, that Canada was never actually founded. No doubt this statement has caused a knee-jerk reaction among many of Cooper's readers. It seems absurd that a country could exist without ever having been founded. Nevertheless, this is Cooper's assertion and his argument deserves examination even if it does not have our full agreement.

Certainly, Mr. Cooper is right to point out that Canada defies the typical founding process. Whereas the United States established its sovereignty essentially from scratch, Canada's political development has been somewhat parasitical. Our constitution was, as Cooper quotes in his article, "the very image and transcript of that of Great Britain." But Canada is more than just a carbon copy of someone else's political framework. Concepts like parliamentary government and liberalism were not Canadian inventions, but they have been adapted and re-interpreted within a Canadian context. We have, in many ways, retained the spirit of Britain's political structure. However, our governmental system has taken on a life of its own, and our regionally-sensitive approach to federalism is unique in the world. Canada has demonstrated that a nation's founding need not be precipitated through revolution and civil war.

Because each Canadian region has its own cultural and political concerns, each region also has its own political figures who have addressed these concerns. This may perhaps explain Canada's lack of nationally-recognized founding fathers. Every American from Montana to Texas recognizes George Washington's name, but Louis Riel has a significance among Francophone Manitobans that he will never have in Yellowknife or St. John's. Though compelling in many respects, Mr. Cooper's argument falls short at certain points. Essentially, it seems problematic to define Canada by the founding template of another country; the establishment of our nation should be examined on its own terms. Certainly, Canada's founding process was atypical insofar as it may be compared with the US. But can we really go so far as to say that it was never founded at all?

The Canadian political landscape has always been extremely diverse. Deep-seated political, economic and cultural cleavages cut across our country's many and varied regions. In his first article, Mr. Rae discusses Canada's diverse regional concerns as being potentially seditious if they are not managed properly. Rae suggests that when political allegiances are forced, or when cultural distinctives are eradicated in favour of "the nation," it always seems to backfire. One need only whisper the phrase "residential schools" to be quickly and chillingly reminded of that fact. Rae argues that, rather than creating national solidarity, the application of a "cookie-cutter approach to equality" usually only creates inter-provincial resentment. Consequently, while there is certainly a need for healthy central government in Canada, its strength should not be achieved through the suppression of regional distinctions. In keeping with this notion, Canada has allowed its many regions to maintain their unique qualities, recognizing that to paint our country with one national brush and say "this is Canada" is to deny the very real regional distinctions within her borders.. The multicultural 'mosaic' model, our policy of official bilingualism and Quebec's distinct society status are all examples of Canada's approach to managing diversity under a federal umbrella.

One might be inclined to think that in a country where citizens have such strong regional allegiances, the country might have trouble keeping their national loyalty. This, however, does not seem to be the case. In May 1998, the University of Chicago produced a study on the subject of national pride. Of the 23 countries that participated in the survey, Canada was found to be the third most patriotic. It seems to defy logic that Canadians, as diverse as they are, seem to identify so strongly on a national level. It would seem that Canadians, while they do not identify with a particular set of founding fathers, strongly identify with Canada. While the jury may still be out regarding the process by which Canada has become a country, it is clear that the founding method—whatever it is—has not compromised national solidarity.

The Canada we are today isn't the Canada we were yesterday, and it won't be the same country tomorrow. This reality isn't cause for alarm; rather, it is something to be celebrated. Canada exists on a foundation of paradoxes. Our founding principles are "diversity and unity," according to Rae. Our political system has been built upon institution and innovation, which means that our country is malleable. The mistakes in

our past have not defined us, which means that our country is teachable. Finally, our country is versatile: Though we value tradition, we are not so restricted by former ways of doing things that we are inhibited from experimenting with new ones. Call it founding or call it Confederation, Canada came into existence in 1867 and ever since then, our country has been in a constant state of re-invention. I hope it never stops.