

# CANADIAN CULTURE

## The Elusive Canadian

Most observers will find that there is no such thing as a 'typical Canadian'. In fact, most Canadians would be insulted or horrified at being labelled as one! There are several reasons for this; the most telling of these factors are geography, multiculturalism, and post-modernity/cultural fragmentation.

## Geography

Canada is big, almost ten million square kilometres. It covers seven per cent of the earth's surface. In contrast to its immense physical size, Canada's population is about thirty five million and most of the people live in a strip just north of the border with the United States. Most of the country is sparsely populated wilderness or arctic tundra.

Canada's major cities are strung out like a row of beads near to the US-Canada border, which runs for about 5,000 km, the longest unguarded border in the world. Due to its proximity to the US Canada's biggest trading partner is the US. From east to west the regions of Canada are: the Maritime Provinces, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairie Provinces, British Columbia. North of the 10 provinces are 3 territories which are home to native Canadian Indian and Inuit (Eskimo) populations. Currently, the politically correct term to refer to these ethnic groups is 'First Nations'.

Canada is officially bilingual with both French and English being national languages. The province of Quebec is where the majority of French-speaking Canadians live but there are pockets of French-speaking people scattered throughout the country. While there has been a certain amount of regionalism within Canada, this has waned of late. In years past, there was a secessionist movement in the province of Quebec which sought to win popular support for Quebec to become an independent country. The younger generation of Quebecois does not support secession.

## Not Americans!

Due to their geographic proximity to the U.S. and the fact that their accent is similar, Canadians are often confused for Americans. This is an area of sensitivity and for the most part Canadians do not like to be mistaken for Americans. While both countries have enjoyed a friendly and productive relationship since the War of 1812, Canada often feels threatened by the immense cultural and economic power of the US which has a population 10 times that of Canada.

Canadians tend to be more subdued and less openly patriotic than their American neighbours. But nothing draws Canadians together more than when they defeat Americans in sporting events.

Most Canadians are grateful for the stable and peaceful relations with their neighbour whose economic strength and military might has profited them greatly. It is important to remember that the USA is the only nation that shares a border with Canada and this makes it a strong influence upon Canadian culture. This has fostered an official policy by the Canadian federal government of cultural protectionism to encourage and promote Canadian culture and prevent American culture from too much penetration (one good example is radio and television, where Canadian stations have to provide more than seventy per cent Canadian content in their programming).

The other major cultural influence, although more subtle, is that of Britain. Canada was a British colony until 1867 and therefore the legal system and social structure of the country is founded largely on the British model. In the areas of politics, education, and social infrastructure one will find that Canada generally fits somewhere between the American and British systems. The obvious exception is that of Quebec, which was a French colony until 1759.

## Population

Canada's population has mushroomed from the estimated 200,000 Indians and Inuit in the year 1600. Initially this was due to British and French immigration but for many years there was hostility between the two groups. Canada is officially bilingual with both French and English being national languages. According to the 2011 census, 58% of Canadians spoke only English in their home while 18.2% of the population spoke only French. Approximately 20% of Canadians reported speaking a language other than French and English at home (either exclusively or in combination with English or French). In total, 200 different languages were identified as being spoken in Canadian homes.

The majority of Canadians are immigrants or descended from immigrants since the Second World War. Initially migrants were predominantly from Eastern and Southern Europe but Canada's immigration policies have opened the door to immigrants from all over the world. Nearly twenty percent of Canadians today were born in another country.

The aboriginals of the country (known as the First Nations) are made up of various indigenous tribes and Inuit peoples (who live in the northern territories). In recent years, there has been a resurgence of aggressively (and successfully) reclaiming their lands and sovereignty privileges usurped by the British and the French generations ago. Combined with land-claims negotiated with the Federal Government, there is a revival of animistic native spirituality among them.

### **Ethnic Mosaic**

One of the clear distinctives of Canada is that for decades, Canada has pursued a deliberate policy of multiculturalism. That means that the country seeks to preserve the cultural heritage of each people group, so that now Canada has the image of being an ethnic mosaic. Whereas the U.S. is a 'melting pot' into which new people assimilate, Canadian policy towards immigrants has been to encourage the expression of their own (non-Canadian) culture.

Since Canada is a mosaic of many different cultures, the following are characteristics of Canadians:

- *Tolerant.* Canadians are tolerant and open-minded, largely due to the ethnic diversity of their country.
- *Egalitarian.* They hold strongly to a belief in ethnic and gender equality.
- *Open-minded.* Many people maintain friendships with those outside their own ethnic background and religious confession. Many of the country's festivals celebrate ethnic diversity through music, dance, and food.
- *Generous.* Not all individuals are necessarily generous in their relative affluence, but historically Canada has, as a nation, given generously to international aid and development projects.
- *Globally aware.* Canadians tend to be aware of global issues and news outside of their own community/country.
- *Private.* In the face of such wide differences within society, Canadians place a premium on privacy, a place to retreat to the familiarity of their own family and personal lives.
- *Relativistic.* Objective standards seem outdated in such a pluralistic culture. People with outspoken absolute standards are not well-received, particularly in the areas of religion and race relations.
- *Liberal.* Canada has legalized abortion, with limits, and was one of the first countries to allow same-sex marriage.
- *Compartmentalised.* Canadians do not approach life holistically. Apparent contradictions in attitudes and actions can be attributed to this; people attempt to prevent the many facets of their lives from interfering with each other (financial, religious, sexual, recreational, political, etc.). There is a strong separation between church and state, to the point that the church has been marginalized and somewhat 'irrelevant' in public debate.
- *Age gap.* The cultural difference between the older, traditional values and the new post-modern generation is perhaps just as telling as the other (geographical and ethnic) cultural differences.
- *Peacemakers.* Canada is generally seen internationally as a 'peace-keeping' nation. They have been pleased to contribute soldiers to many United Nations peacekeeping forces. Canadians have a high respect for the law so law-enforcement officers are generally well-received worldwide. Many immigrants came to Canada to escape the conflicts in their own lands and value the peace they experience in Canada. Canadians tend to be rather non-confrontational, being more polite and reserved than their southern neighbours.
- *Cynical.* In contrast to the openly patriotic gusto of the USA, Canadians tend to be more cynical, possibly as a defence mechanism. Since they cannot out-strip the other more powerful G7 countries in terms of traditional power, it is easier to cut them down with humour. This sense of humour is typically ironic or sarcastic. People from other cultures may see this sarcasm as hurtful and overly negative, but generally, Canadians are most sarcastic with those to whom they are closest and with whom they feel most comfortable. Some may see it as a national, dysfunctional form of affection. This cynicism is also reflected by the fact that Canadians are less politically

active that many other Westerners. They prefer to let the government provide social services and stay out of their private lives.

- *Unpatriotic*. Canadians display an apparent outward lack of patriotism (probably due to their disdain of the bravura displays of Americans) and much of their humour is rooted around a gentle mocking of the country. Due to the multicultural composition of the country, there is less outward expression of patriotism than in the more monocultural nations. But while abroad, Canadians will never hesitate to make it clear that they are from Canada, as it generally garners a positive response. Canada is politically stable, economically strong, suffers few natural disasters and allows great social and religious freedom. If pressed on the issue, deep down, most Canadians would admit to feeling a very strong love of their country and believe that it is the best country in which to live.

### **Independent Individualists**

Until relatively recently, most of the country was still open frontier for the European settlers. The frontiers-man's traits of independence and self-reliance are still highly valued, and ingrained in the Canadian mentality. The harsher climate and outdoor-oriented lifestyle of many Canadians affirms/encourages these values, but the general expectation that the government provides social services has tempered this to some degree. On this same note, efficiency and good organisational skills are also valued within Canadian culture.

Individualism (a result of modernism and Humanism) likewise persists, as each person is expected to be responsible for themselves, to form their own opinions and present their own image. People feel they must be true to themselves first, ahead of family or community obligations. This tendency toward individualism and away from community responsibility has been made even stronger by post-modernity and the consumer mentality.

### **Church Life**

Like life in general, Canadian church life is too diverse to categorise easily. According to Operation World, over 13,000,000 people are affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church (approximately 40%), although most would be nominal and attend church infrequently. The liberal United Church of Canada is the largest Protestant denomination, followed by the Anglican Church. Traditionally a strongly Christian country, less than twenty-five percent of the population attend church once (or more times) a year and this figure is dropping by about one percent a year. Approximately 30% of the population is affiliated with a Protestant church with half of those (15% of the population) being involved in an evangelical church.

Many churches are ethnically based, immigrant churches and growth is strongest in some of these ethnic groups. In Toronto, a city of 5.5 million people, you can find 154 different languages spoken and churches that use most of the major languages of the world. Some churches are intentionally aiming for an ethnic mix but most multi-ethnic churches prefer separate services in different languages. Many new missionaries are also coming from the ethnic churches.

Due to the secularization of the nation, Canada is increasingly being seen around the world as a mission field unto itself, especially in Quebec and among the First Nations people. Historical failures by the church have left these populations resistant to the Gospel. An increasing population of people from other world religions, due to immigration, has brought further challenge to the Evangelical church in Canada. There are sizeable unreached communities of people living in every major city in Canada. Churches are slowly beginning to seek training and are developing strategies to reach out to immigrant populations and people from other religious backgrounds.

Pentecostal/charismatic churches and congregations embracing a more informal, less traditional style of worship have witnessed growth while the historical, mainline denominations have lost ground.

Canada is unique in having a good number of Bible institutes, Bible colleges and Christian liberal arts colleges which seek to lay a foundation for life and ministry. Still, as in all areas of society, the United States has a large influence on church life in Canada with many pastors having been trained in the U.S. One major difference is that Canada does not boast the mega-churches which are found throughout the U.S. The majority of the churches in Canada are small (100 attendees or less) to mid-sized (100-300) with very few large churches. In terms of societal norms regarding religion, Canada is probably more comparable to England than it is to the U.S.

## **Canadians Working on Multi-national Teams**

1. Canadians are often able to be more objective about goals and difficult situations, but may not appear as passionate as other nationalities.
2. Canadians are comfortable working with people of other ethnicities because they have been required to do so in Canada already.
3. Canadians are generally able to work independently, and in fact may prefer to do so.
4. Authoritarian styles of leadership may bring negative reactions from them. Canadians prefer a more egalitarian organisational structure.
5. When there is disagreement, their reactions tend to be less confrontational, perhaps employing a diplomatic discussion to seek a solution, perhaps quietly withdrawing from the situation and doing things their own way.
6. Canada's pluralistic context makes bold missionary witness a challenge to many Canadians. At the same time, Canadians are open to listening to the opinions of others who differ from themselves and seek common ground.
7. A deep-seated nationalistic pride is generally not visible but may be revealed under stress (such as when dealing with interpersonal frustrations and situations of inefficiency). Canadians value the celebration of unique Canadian holidays.
8. Canadians may seek to be bridge-builders in helping people from other countries work together, especially in helping other cultures understand how to relate to Americans.