



The Canada-U.S. Relationship in the the Time of "America First"

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Few ties are as essential to the United States and Canada as the relationship they enjoy with one another. John F. Kennedy's words to the Parliament in Ottawa on May 17, 1961 still ring true. "Geography has made us neighbors," he said. "History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us allies." In his first trip abroad, the young U.S. president made the case for the shared interests and destiny of Canada and his own country.

But since 2016 fractures in that relationship have aroused concerns in Canada and the U.S. northern border states. The American economic nationalism pushed by President Donald Trump threatens cross-border trade, and the conscious rejection of multilateralism epitomized Trump's "America First" is closing avenues for dialogue and understanding. In this context, policymakers on both sides of the border may find guidance in their quest for good relations by returning to Kennedy's spirit of cooperation.

The Interdependency of the United States and Canada

For generations, Canadians have sought on U.S. soil access to resources unavailable in their own country. In 1828, for a small instance, Basile Mignault traveled to northern New York to seek compensation for services rendered during the Revolutionary War. Later, Canadians fought for pecuniary reasons in the Mexican War and U.S. Civil War. In the second half of the nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of Canadians settled in the U.S. Midwest and worked in American industry, contributing to the United States' economic ascent. This sort of relationship endures in different ways. At present, over 50,000 Canadians work or study in the United States every year; and those who winter in Florida are ten times as numerous. Canadian tourist dollars have become an economic lynchpin in many parts of the United States. And total cross-border trade amounts to more than half-a-trillion dollars annually.

The relationship is also important in intangible ways. While Mignault was traveling south, republican ideas were trickling northward. American institutions, values, and myths shaped early nineteenth-century Canadian political discourse and inspired rebellions against British colonial authorities in 1837. American models tended to decline thereafter, but Canadians continued to seek social and cultural capital south of the border. Later, by the thousands, Americans settled in the Canadian West and shaped a distinctive regional culture alongside European immigrants.

But as today's political circumstances suggest, economic and cultural bonds do not always suffice. A great deal of mutual good will and effort is needed to sustain positive relations between Canada and the United States. Statesmanship is required to restrain passions born of economic frustration and reconcile policy differences.

Statesmanship

The Canadian Rebellions of 1837 and their aftermath proved to be a tremendous test of good will on both sides of the border. Fleeing rebels sought to mobilize American support for a war against Britain. But far from acceding to Canada's U.S. sympathizers, President Martin Van Buren communicated directly with British representatives to defuse tensions; and Congress empowered local officials to arrest those who launched unsanctioned raids into Canada from American soil. Alexander McLeod, then under arrest in New York for his role in an attack on a U.S. ship, was exonerated, perhaps as a gesture of friendly intentions. The border was secured from both sides. As President Kennedy later explained, citing Robert Frost, "good fences make good neighbors."

By Kennedy's time, the measures of the 1830s seemed quaint, but the same type of statesmanship – looking beyond popular whims to the benefits of friendly relations – remained necessary. Even more telling, and constructive, than his 1961 speech in Ottawa was then Massachusetts Senator Kennedy's address at the Université de Montréal eight years earlier. On that occasion as well, Senator Kennedy celebrated Canada – U.S. ties, but candidly admitted that the American system of government could often cause frustration in international affairs.

Reaching as far back as the McLeod Case, Kennedy discussed the power of the Senate, the executive branch, and American courts to frustrate one another's initiatives in U.S. foreign relations. Because it spoke "with one tongue but many voices," the American government could send mixed signals and impaired its own ability to maintain friendly relations with neighboring countries.

The lessons, according to Kennedy, were twofold, and they remain pertinent today. Canadians and Americans need to properly understand the other nation's government, political culture, and domestic interests if they are to minimize areas of conflict. And even when the U.S. political system complicates the enactment of mutually advantageous measures, leaders in both countries must continue to foster good will and move ahead in areas of shared concern.

Today's Prospects and Challenges

"We have a responsibility to demonstrate to all peoples everywhere," Kennedy argued, "that peaceful and stable existence by powerful countries side by side, can remain a permanent reality in today's troubled world." Kennedy's relationship with Prime Minister John Diefenbaker was notoriously unfriendly and the U.S. president may even have supported Diefenbaker's Liberal opponent in 1962 and 1963. Yet Kennedy's words matter no less in the era of "America First," marked by the frictions President Trump sparks with longtime U.S. allies.

There is some evidence that certain leaders are looking to balance interest tensions with statesmanship. State officials across New England have continued dialogues with Canadian counterparts; Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is building a broad cross-border coalition trying to safeguard the North American Free Trade Agreement. There is yet hope that such efforts will halt potentially damaging shocks from resurgent economic nationalism and unilateralism.

In Basile Mignault's day, crossing the U.S.-Canada border was a mundane act. In some ways it still is. What is far more necessary, now as then, is for courageous statesmen to find ways to bridge the border. Therein lie benefits far more valuable than electoral rewards.

Read more in Patrick Lacroix, “Choosing Peace and Order: National Security and Sovereignty in a North American Borderland, 1837-1842” *The International History Review* 38, no. 5 (2016): 943-960; and “Amid NAFTA Uncertainty, Canada Has Allies in New England,” *The Montreal Gazette*, January 11, 2018.