

The Two Canadas

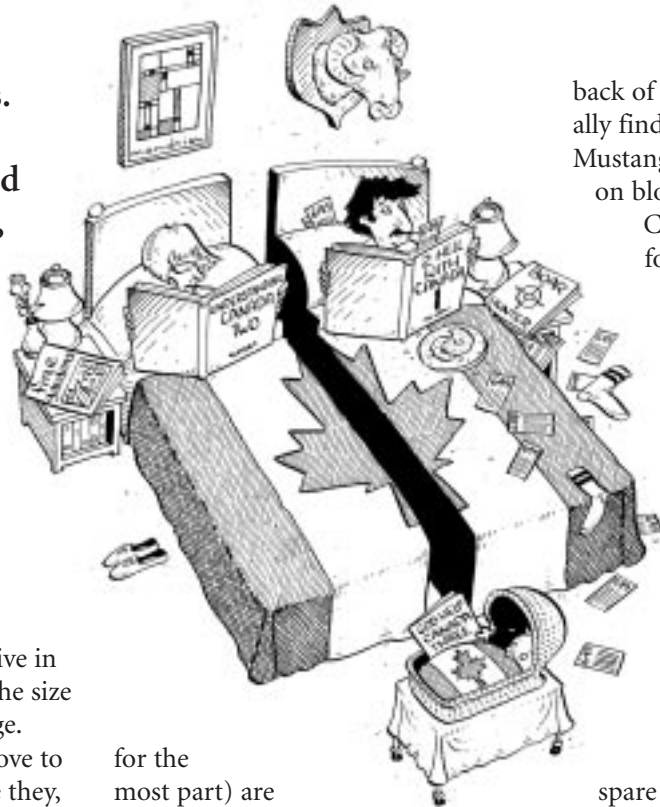
BY FRED STENSON

There are two Canadas. Usually, the two are described as French and English, or, sometimes, East and West.

But French-English and East-West are only smoke-screens obscuring a more crucial and final division. In truth, the two Canadas are not separated by language or distance. In every Canadian city, town and country lane, they exist side by side.

The people of Canada One live in suburban houses, each house the size of an average East Indian village. They are usually planning a move to a more spacious home because they, their children and their dog have begun to feel cramped—they have caught sight of one another during the past week. If Canada One moves to the inner city, it is because they are attracted to the funky neighbourhoods and the big old trees. Upon buying their funky old house, they bulldoze it and the trees with it. They build another East Indian village-sized house to the absolute outer limits (height and ground cover) allowed by the local planning by-law.

Canada Two used to live in parts of town that were neither fashionably old nor fashionably new. Their preference was a bungalow. But, nowadays, Canada Two lives in the same suburbs as Canada One. This is because Canada One (office workers



for the most part) are increasingly clueless about their car, their house and all their appliances. The less they know or can do with their hands, the more they are willing to pay Canada Two to do it for them. Faced with an ever-rising income, Canada Two has been forced to leave the bungalow in favour of the big suburban house with the front-drive garage.

In their yards, Canada One has lots of grass (always sod, never seed), a few perennials and bedding out plants, and plenty of mulch. As a rule, they are failing to grow herbs. The Canada Two yard has less grass and more vegetables. Through extensive use of railroad ties, Canada Two yards look like faithful replicas of Forts Calgary or Macleod. At the

back of a Canada Two yard, you usually find a classic automobile, a Ford Mustang or a Plymouth Fury. It is up on blocks and covered with a tarp.

Canada Two likes to party and, for that purpose, builds an elevated deck with a hot tub on top. If Canada One had a hot tub it would be indoors and they would still walk to it in sweats and a towel. Hot tubs tend to be less popular with Canada One, generally, because Canada Ones are fearful of bacteria. Canada Two embraces the theory that it is better to have too much bacteria than too little.

Canada One houses are spare inside and tasteful. Canada Two houses are stuffed to the rafters. Canada Two buys things not because they need them but because they were on sale. Canada Two's most prized possession is a Robert Bateman print of a cougar which they got a great deal on at an auction, and which they will soon sell at another auction. Canada Two living rooms have a man-eating couch and a matching chair. The latter is missing a leg and here you will find most of the books in the house, often a couple of Reader's Digest Condensed Books that have been passed down through three generations.

Canada One's books are kept on the otherwise empty coffee table: a 14-pound book of landscape photography at one end and a recent fiction

bestseller in hardcover on the other. Canada One does not sully its books by reading them.

Canada Twos are ardent garage salers. They fill their closets, basements and garages with electric footbaths, blenders, exercise equipment, electric coffee makers and excess coffee tables, usually the chrome kind with the removable glass top. Eventually they rent self-storage near the airport to contain the excess 10-speed bicycles, collector plates, bar stools and captain's chairs. Occasionally, they themselves have a garage sale to which their friends and family contribute. Throughout the day, everyone has a few too many blendered drinks, and an argument erupts over whose electric footbath went for six-fifty and whose sold for a buck seventy-five.

Gambling is another way to tell Canada One and Canada Two apart. Canada One doesn't know how to work a VLT and wouldn't be caught dead in a local casino. On holiday in another country, however, Canada One gambles like mad and so badly that other players at the table avert their eyes. Canada Two gambles everywhere and on everything that moves. They belong to two hockey pools, think nothing of blowing off a hundred bucks on a VLT after work, and claim to have won two thousand dollars on their last trip to the casino. Despite provincial statistics, Canada Two is better than even on all forms of gambling.

Canada One drives a new Sport Utility Vehicle. Four-wheel-drive. One hundred and eighty horsepower. And it will never be taken off pavement, except when forced to park in a grassy field at a farmer's market. (You could get a rock chip.) Canada One SUVs get 1960s gas mileage, but that doesn't stop Canada Ones from being sincere environmentalists deeply concerned about global warming.

Canada Two favours trucks, big honking trucks, which they love to take off-road to see what it takes to get them stuck. When they succeed in getting stuck, they winch a few trees out of the ground to get free again. In the back is an extra gas tank and an all-terrain-vehicle, a "quad," on which you can really rip up some scenery.

Often, Canada Two's purpose in the backcountry is to hunt, using a high-power rifle they claim they will never register. They still regard it as manly to blast a grazing herbivore at a distance ten times that at which the animal, even given its superb sensory apparatus, can possibly see, hear or scent them. Canada One is grossed out by hunting, but would be less so if they could do it in Canada Two's truck, and with Canada Two there to do all the nasty skinning and cutting up.

Canada One drinks shade-grown organic coffee and grinds its own beans. Canada Two drinks most of its coffee at the doughnut shop and doesn't much care where it comes from. Canada One used to drink whole milk, switched to 1 per cent and is trying to get used to the taste of skim. Canada Two thinks the concern over fat is

pinko and wuss, and upped its intake of steak and eggs when it turned 40.

An area of some agreement between the two is hockey. They both love hockey and encourage their kids to play. Because they now live in the same suburbs, their kids play together on the same teams. That's where the similarity ends. While Canada One encourages its children to play hard but fair, and views it as a way to build character, competitiveness and good sportsmanship, Canada Two urges its children to play fanatically and to take no prisoners. Never be afraid to hit or be hit or to drop the gloves. Canada Two regards hockey as the school of hard knocks and believes that its children could all get drafted if the system wasn't fixed. This is somewhat like the Canada One view that all their children are gifted.

Consider what happens at just about every child's hockey game from tiny-mite on up. In between periods, over a cup of coffee in a styrofoam cup, Canada Two's parents are raging. They rage about what a crook the referee is, what a deadbeat the coach is, and how they're never going to win a thing as long as the coach keeps playing the wimpish Canada One kids on a regular shift instead of playing the Canada Two kids all the time. Widen that frame and you will observe the Canada One parents. They are having coffee too but are afraid to drink theirs. They blow on it instead. Meanwhile, though they don't agree, and are careful not to meet Canada Two's angry eyes, they nod their heads metronomically. This is the glue that keeps the two Canadas at peace: Canada One cowardice.

Also crossbreeding. Inevitably, the Canadas meet, mate and hybridize, urged on by the attraction of opposites, the lure of the alien, and the fact that they now live on the same street. Then they reproduce and create Canada Three, a person who has within his/her genetics aspects of both Canadas One and Two. Since Canada Three will eventually be the only Canada (once Canadas One and Two die off), I think we should know who they are. Here is a brief profile.

Canada Three cannot fix the lawnmower but, unlike Canada One, thinks they ought to. Canada Three is both for and against immigration; likewise gun control. They both hate and love the United States. Canada Three has garage sales, but in secret. Canada Three can't decide if the TV belongs in the living room. In short, everything Canada Two does with glee and braggadocio, Canada Three has a secret guilty urge to do—but feels railroaded into acting like Canada One instead.

I'm afraid a typical Canada Three is a person riddled with indecision, guilt and resentment, forever divided against himself. I'm even more afraid that Canada Three is me.

Fred Stenson was recently nominated for the Giller Prize for his novel *The Trade*.