

Canada 150: Our National Mood in Four Easy Charts

Frank Graves

The question, “what is our national mood?”, is more than an anecdotal curiosity. Mood, or perhaps the national zeitgeist, reveals the collective expression of some of the most important forces at play in our society.

Our approach will be to look at the evolution of the national mood as we believe that the time series is more revealing than just looking at current opinion. We will try to understand the current mood in contrast to where we were at two previous points in Canadian history; our centennial and the opening of the new millennium.

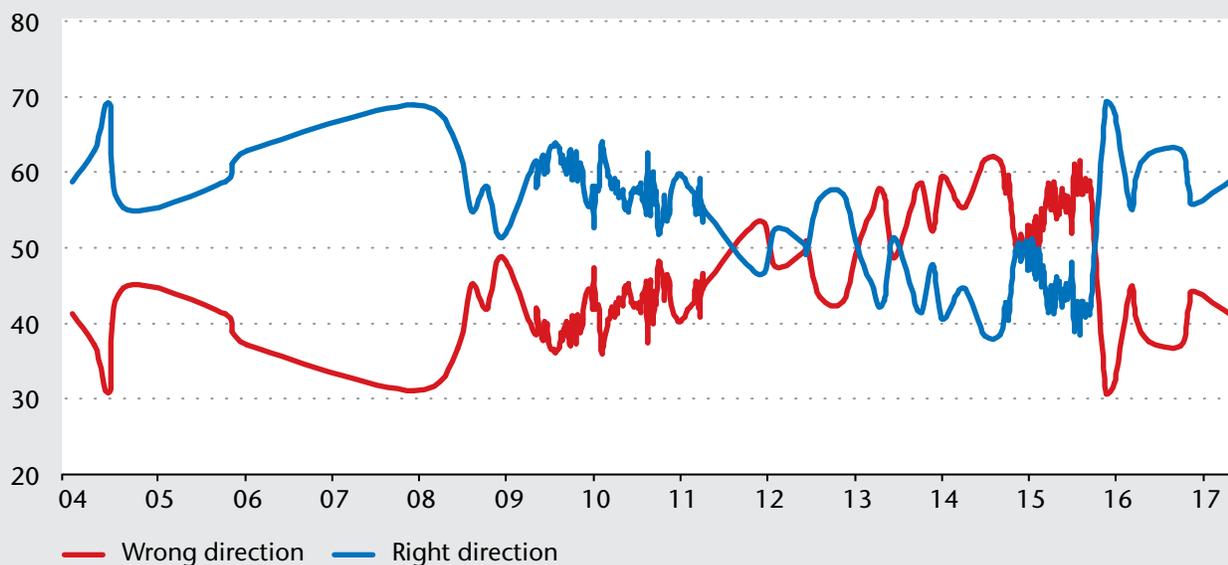
“*In 1967, Canada was a much younger, much smaller, and much more ethnically homogenous society. Our median age of around 26 contrasted sharply with our much older median age of 42 today. Visible minorities accounted for two or three per cent of our population; they’re approaching 20 per cent today.*”

Think back 50 years, for those of us old enough to recall, how Canada looked at our centennial. In 1967, Canada was a much younger, much smaller, and much more ethnically homogenous society. Our median age of around 26 contrasted sharply with our much older median age of 42 today. Visible minorities accounted for two or three per cent of our population; they’re approaching 20 per cent today. In addition to being older and much more diverse, we are vastly more educated than we were at our centennial.

Fast forward to the opening of this century and Canadians were remark-

Chart 1: Direction of country*

Q. *All things considered, would you say the country is moving in the right direction or the wrong direction?*



*Figures adjusted to exclude those who skipped the question. BASE: Canadians; June 1-8, 2017, n=1,741, MOE +/- 2.4%, 19 times out of 20

ably ebullient and confident. The world was our oyster; we were the new Phoenicians and we believed that the economy would be propelled forward on an infinite cloud of prosperity fuelled by information technology and globalization. The “end of history” had seen the triumph of liberal capitalism; the world was now flat and we would no longer have to deal with the misery of business cycles. So how do we look at 150?

First of all, while we now have more people feeling confident about the direction of the country than we did, say, 10 years ago, the numbers are still less positive than they were at the beginning of the century. The numbers on direction of the federal government have dropped even further in that time.

Of great significance is that while there are many Canadas, there are increasingly two salient Canadas which are mutually irreconcilable in their outlook. For example, those individuals supporting the conservative vision of Canada are *much* more negative about national direction and direction of the federal government. A revealing piece of evidence of these new solitudes is the difference between who Liberal and Conservative supporters wanted to win the recent French election. By a margin of 58 to 42, Conservative supporters preferred Le Pen, versus only three per cent of Liberal supporters.

One of the most important indicators of national mood would be how people rate their quality of life (com-

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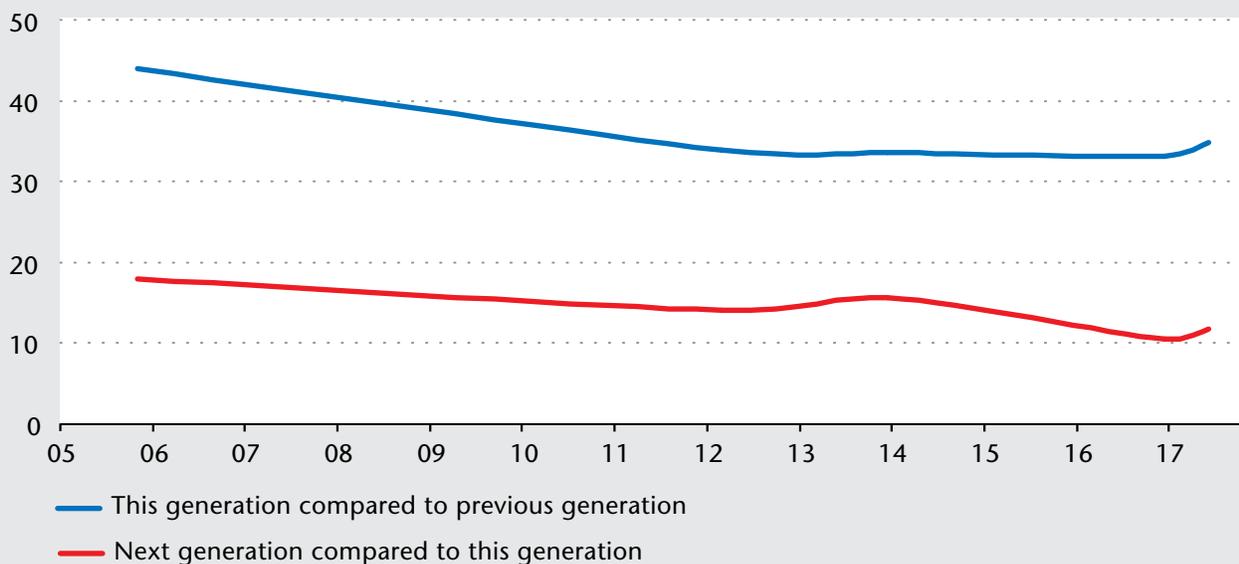
pared to the past and future). Chart 2 compares changes in answers to

Chart 2: Changes in Quality of Life

Q. *Thinking about your overall quality of life, would you say that you are better off, worse off, or about the same as the previous generation was 25 years ago?*

Thinking about your overall quality of life do you think the next generation will be better off, worse off, or about the same as you are 25 years from now?

per cent saying better off



BASE: Canadians; June 1-8, 2017, n=1,762, MOE +/- 2.3%, 19 times out of 20

the question of how we compare our quality of life to previous generations and how do we think quality of life will be for the next generation. As one can see, the incidence of people who feel that they are doing better than previous generations has been dropping steadily from close to 45 per cent to 35 per cent. Much more disturbingly, the incidence of people who think the next generation will be doing better has dropped from a meagre 20 per cent to an even scander 10 per cent. It used to be that the whole idea of shared progress and middle class prosperity was that the next generation would do better than the previous one. Clearly, that middle class dream is in disarray and this has had a corrosive impact on our national mood. It is difficult to find any economic attitudes that show anything other than a much

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darker mood than we saw in the past and, whatever the grey outlook of the recent past, it turns to a nearly black outlook on the future.

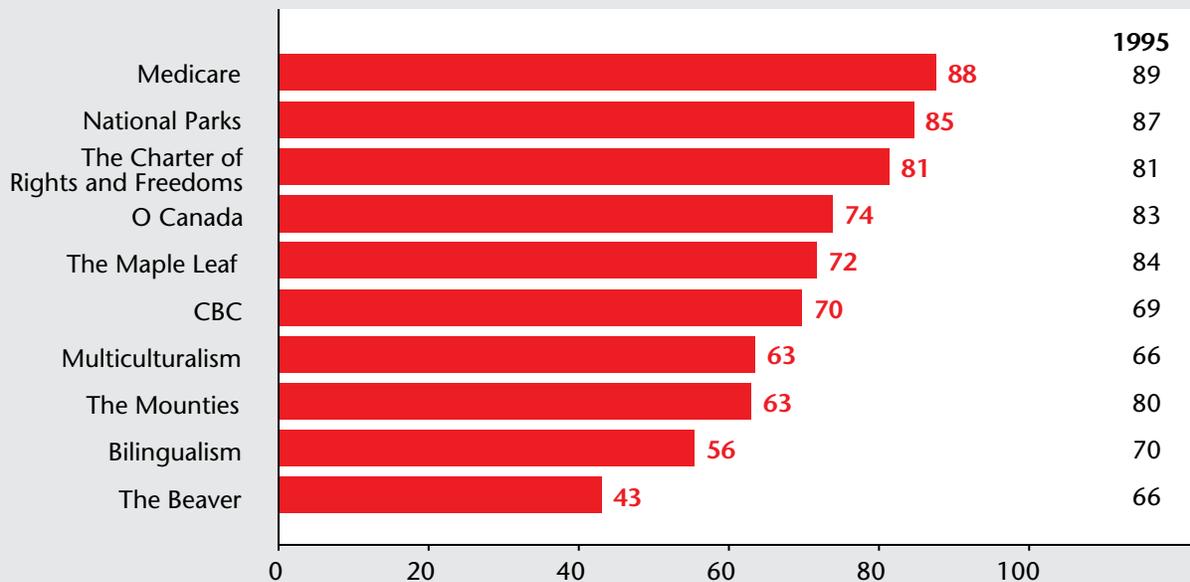
How about the realm of culture? We look at two critical indicators of shifts in our symbol systems and our sources of belonging.

Comparing the symbols that contribute most to Canadian identity from 1995 to today shows a country with a generally lower sense of symbolic identification than what we saw in 1995. It is also the case that the symbol systems that remain most resilient are those that have to do with the role of government and public institutions. Medicare, national parks, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms remain the dominant sources of national identification. Notably, the previous Stephen Harper government attempted to shift the relative emphasis of different icons of national identity. He would not be amused to note that Medicare and the Charter, hardly central in his iconogra-

Chart 3: Shifting Symbol Systems

Q. *How strongly do you think each of the following events, objects and values detract or contribute to your sense of Canadian identity?*

per cent who say positive impact (5-7)



BASE: Canadians (online only); January 11-18, 2016 (n=2,312), MOE +/- 2.0%, 19 times out of 20

phy, are once again top-of-the-charts. On the other hand, some of our most cherished traditional icons like the anthem, the flag, the Mounties, bilingualism, and even the beaver, have all dropped precipitously as symbols of Canada. In fact, there appears to be less powerful symbolic glue holding the country together today than in the past.

The final chart tracks Canadians' sense of belonging to various entities such as Canada, province, city, and ethnic group. One of the striking findings in this chart is that overall, just as in the case of symbols, collectively, all sources of belonging are considerably lower than in 1995. Does this mean that our sense of moral community or sense of Canada is actually a little more muted, a little less clear than it was in 1995? That's difficult to say, as

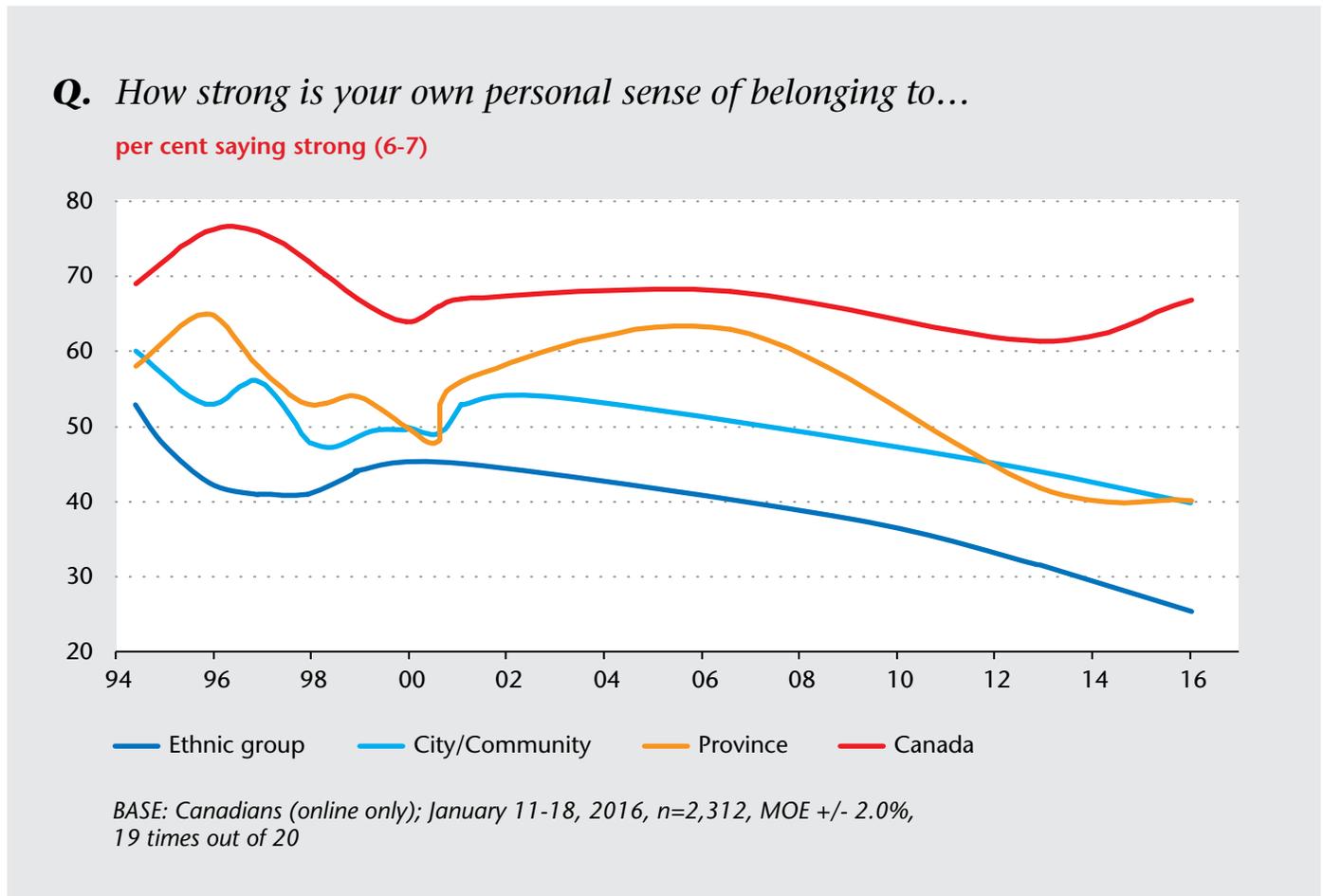
it may also be the case that national identity is more mature and less dependent on 'props' to convey a sense of Canada.

What is clear, however, is that belonging to Canada has remained remarkably high. The concept of a post-national Canada does not really seem evident in these data. Some note that because younger Canadians are less attached to country than other Canadians, this may augur for a diminished attachment to country and rising attachment to world. On the other hand, we have the virtue of being able to compare to 1995 and we find that the difference between young people and older Canadians on attachment to countries precisely the same as it is today. What is really different, however, is the decline in attachment to province, to city, and most strikingly, ethnic group. Ethnic attachment has

plummeted from 55 per cent to 25 per cent and this has occurred over a period where we had the greatest influx of immigration and absolute numbers in our history. So, contrary to the notion of multiculturalism as 'Selling Illusions', which suggested that immigration and multiculturalism would produce a diminution in national attachment and the rise of ethnic enclaves, we've seen exactly the opposite occurring.

All in all, the outlook on the country is relatively positive (and better than it was 10 years ago). What is bad is the unremittingly negative outlook on the economy. Canada 150 is much more anxious and fearful that it was at the beginning of the century; undoubtedly a legacy of the aging of the population and the impacts of 9/11 and subsequent events. It's notable that only three per cent of Canadians think that the world is less dangerous

Chart 4: Sense of Belonging



today than it was 10 years ago despite the fact that, objectively, that might be the right answer.

An age of relative economic stagnation and rising inequality has had a corrosive impact on economic confidence and perhaps produced further mutating of national mood. The division into those seeking a more open approach to the future and those seeking a more 'ordered' approach is now the defining fault line in our national mood.

In the United States, there has been work showing that Trump support is strongly connected to authoritarianism and the same connections have been revealed in the Brexit analysis (see Thoughts on the sociology of Brexit by Will Davies). A British analysis for the London School of Economics by Eric Kaufman, It's NOT the economy stupid: Brexit as a story of personal values prefers to talk about an "ordered" versus "open" orientation. There is little question that this more ordered or closed world

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view is actually a rising force in the advanced Western democracies.

Last year, we created our own 'or-

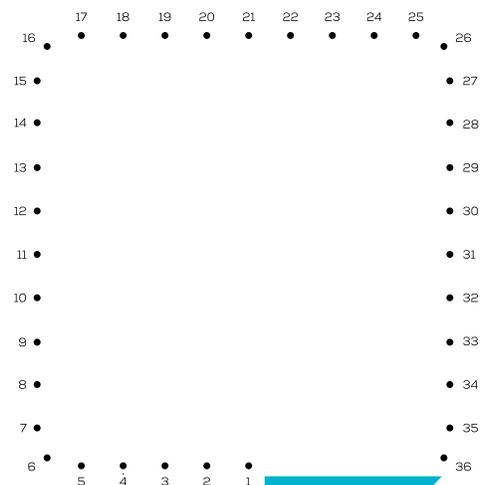
dered' versus 'open' scale based loosely on some of this other work. We found that, overall, a clear majority of Canadians lean to openness (54 per cent) versus the not insignificant minority who favour order (33 per cent). These numbers, while rough, suggest that an authoritarian or ordered outlook is less common in Canada than the United States, where some studies have shown 44 per cent of white Americans displaying authoritarian tendencies.

It is, however, encouraging to note that Canada seems to be less captured by the current wave of populism and so far, the forces of openness seem to be winning this struggle for the future. Perhaps Canada could join Germany and France as the new "Axis of Openness". **P**

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