

Canuckistan Chained to Freedom

By Marjorie Griffin Cohen

For the last three years I've been involved in an international research project that studies how countries on the "semi-periphery" of power cope with globalization. Countries on the semi-periphery are distinct because politicians and the people in them are usually acutely aware of their subordination to the centre of power. This is quite unlike the people in the countries at the centre, who attribute their influence to their general superior know-how and commitment to freedom and democracy — not to their assertion of raw power. They also lack the consciousness that anything could or should be different.

The second thing that makes semi-peripheral countries an identifiable group is that they share an autonomy that allows them, at least potentially, to resist domination. Poor countries lack the means to resist what is happening, or risk too much if they actually do something about it. So, semi-peripheral countries have a consciousness of the power of imperialism lacking in the centre, as well as potential and resources to exert their own power all but absent in countries truly on the periphery of power.

Canada fits the category of a semi-peripheral country very well. It bows to U.S. superior power on important, future-shaping issues, but resists on enough stuff to really irk the U.S. Canadians support the kinds of economic policies that are all bound up in the market (neoliberalism) much as Americans do, but they are not as conservative on social issues. This goes a long way toward explaining the contradictions between the way people in Canada poll on specific issues (health care, education) and who gets elected — people like Paul Martin, Ralph Klein, Gordon Campbell and Jean Charest — all of whom identify with the kind of economics that habitually undermine strong social programs.

Canadians still feel we're part of something progressive when the Romanow Commission recommends that health care remain public (for the most part). We're proud that our courts declare that possessing and smoking pot is not a criminal activity, that people cannot be executed by the state (for the most part) and that marriage

can occur between just about any adults — not just men and women. We're also amazed when Vancouver, in a province with a neoconservative government, still goes ahead with safe-injection sites for drug addicts. And the best surprise was the way Canada teamed up with Mexico to defy George W. Bush on Iraq. And this didn't just outrage the president — U.S. commentators began referring to Canada as Canuckistan, in order to make it absolutely clear we'd gone too far.

American ambassador to Canada Paul Celucci began to threaten in not-so-veiled ways: "We are disappointed in you." Newspaper columnist John Doyle got it right when he equated this threat to the creepy behaviour of the classic wife-beater who uses lines like that to instill terror. The understatement works because the will and the power behind it is so enormous.

There is a will in Canada to be distinct from the U.S., and any tiny bit of leadership in this direction wins support. It's not where we're headed, though. It is safe to predict that Paul Martin will not only toe the U.S. line, but will go to great lengths to anticipate where that line will be drawn. The complicity of Canada will become a non-issue politically, mainly because some goodies will surely be thrown Canada's way to demonstrate the wisdom of a "moderate" approach to Canada-U.S. relations. There won't be any standoffs as we smoothly blend our will to theirs. Not that this is going to be easy for the Canadian government — because the U.S.

is never moderate in its demands. Any deviation on our part is an affront to their notion of democracy and freedom. Could it be different?

The Norway Example

Can a country on the semi-periphery of power be independent of the centre? It's hard, but some countries manage better than others. Norway — another country without much clout in the world — refused to join the European Union because of the effects it

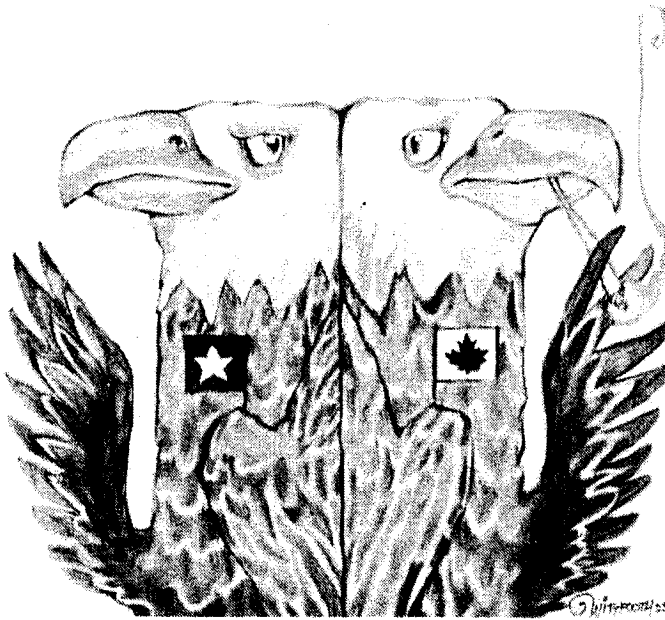


Illustration by Martin Whitfooth

feared EU membership might have upon its sovereignty and its social programs. Norway continues to defy neoliberal trends and still manages to succeed spectacularly in its economic sphere. It's latest affront to neoliberal economics is to introduce a bill to force private corporations in Norway to increase the number of women on their corporate boards to 40 per cent by July, 2005. A government telling corporations how to run their business? Imagine.

Unlike Norway, Canada has chosen the path of integration with its dominant neighbour and changing that direction would require a very special kind of political organizing and leadership. I do not see it on the horizon and, until a developed opposition is in place, we will continue to have resources stripped and bow to ever more demands for greater access for U.S. companies in Canada. I know this is pessimistic.

But are there short-term policies we could pursue that might make a difference? Definitely. Even slowing governments in their rush to downsize, privatize and conform to the U.S. plan makes a difference to individual lives and sometimes even rescues whole programs. Slowing the pace of change can also give some breathing room to figure out larger strategies. I'm hopeful that someday there will be a taste for change in Canada, although at this point it is hard to imagine what will grip the public's imagination. Perhaps it will be a special leader with the right message, or perhaps it will be sparked by just one too many infringements upon cherished rights (a national identity card?).

Using NAFTA against U.S. Demands

I do not expect heroics of Canada in the mean time, but I would like to see Canada become just a tad more creative in its assertion of economic independence — even within the straightjacket of NAFTA, for example. Both the Conservative and Liberal governments insisted that NAFTA was important mainly because it would protect Canada from excessive U.S. demands. I was certainly among the skeptics, but there is, in fact, a measure of protection under NAFTA that Canada seems afraid to use. We have seen the power of U.S. regulatory imperialism most recently through attempts to keep B.C. electricity in the public sector. The most recent outrage (aside from the widely publicized, ongoing softwood lumber and beef issues) is how the U.S. is forcing Canadian exporting provinces to comply with U.S. notions of how an electricity system should be run — if they want to continuing exporting.

According to the U.S. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) Canadian electricity companies must hand over their transmission systems so that the private sector can have access to the domestic market. This change is not a wise policy move, something

even recognized 22 U.S. state governments — which object vehemently to these proposed changes. But no government official — at any level of government in Canada — has objected at all. This is a hot topic — not many Canadians would willingly trade a perfectly reasonable way of dealing with electricity (resources owned and managed by the public and run for the benefit of the Canadian people) for the grossly inefficient, pricey and unreliable system the U.S. government thinks is a good idea.

This is where the U.S.'s odd notion of what constitutes freedom — a "free market" — should come into direct conflict with Canadian policy. In the case of electricity "freedom" means the right for anyone who wants to enter the electricity market to have access to public transmission assets and to re-sell these rights to transmission access. A derivatives market in electricity — with all the risks, price escalations and ensuing disasters — is what the U.S. envision as "freedom."

The good thing about NAFTA is that it does not say Canada must have exactly the same system as the U.S. in order to export to it. That's what "national treatment" is all about. The U.S. is required to trade with Canada even if we are different. It's only the timidity of governments here that prevents NAFTA from being used in ways that could benefit Canadians.

There are all sorts of other creative ways to use NAFTA — and improve the economy. Why not challenge them on their import bans against marijuana? If Canada shouldn't have laws to protect the environment and its people, surely the U.S. shouldn't have laws to safeguard its odd morality. The U.S. ban on what is probably our largest cash crop is certainly a disguised protection and restraint of trade. If Canada only asserted its right to trade on this issue the B.C. economy would have a fighting chance of regaining its second-place position in the provincial rankings, which it recently lost to Alberta.

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