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JOHN RALSTON SAUL

# Listen to the North

*From education to sovereignty, southern "solutions" ignore Arctic realities*



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Taking the Muslim pulse



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# Is It All Quebec's Fault?

*A Maritimes-based polemicist ends up sounding like a western separatist.*

LARS OSBERG

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**Fearful Symmetry:  
The Fall and Rise of Canada's Founding Values**

*Brian Lee Crowley*

Key Porter Books

355 pages, softcover

ISBN 9781554701889

**B**RIAN LEE CROWLEY BEGINS *Fearful Symmetry: The Fall and Rise of Canada's Founding Values* by dating the onset of decline in Canada's work ethic, family life and fertility with great precision—June 22, 1960—because that is the day the Union Nationale government of Quebec was replaced by Jean Lesage's Liberals, whose "Quiet Revolution" he holds responsible for the unleashing of secular nationalism in Quebec. For the next 300 pages, he argues that the growth of Canada's government sector, the decline in our productivity growth, the increase in our divorce rates, the rise in suicides, lack of self-control among youth and much, much else are caused by the Québécois nationalist dynamic and the "bidding war" it produced between federal and provincial governments for the allegiance of the francophone Quebecers.

If his arguments are even half correct, we would all (even Quebecers) have been far better off if the 1981 referendum had succeeded and Quebec had gone its separate way. However, Crowley concludes (in his view, optimistically) by assuring us that the next best thing to separation is Quebec's political irrelevance, and the ascendancy of a traditionalist juggernaut. Stay-at-home moms will have more babies, their irrevocably committed husbands will work longer hours, Canada's poor will discover new reserves of character as their welfare payments are cut and gross domestic product growth will surge ahead as the Athabasca tar sands fuel the world's thirst for petroleum—all good things that will happen because Quebec voters are no longer essential for federal majorities.

There are many irritating aspects to this book. It is remarkable that a book that is ostensibly about changing Canadian values presents no survey data whatsoever to support Crowley's many large assertions. The World Values Survey and International Social Survey Programme have, since the 1980s, been running large surveys of value orientations—in Canada and other countries (see [www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org) or [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org)). Their results on the similarities and differences in the evolution of

social values in advanced capitalist countries are nuanced and fascinating—not at all mono-causal, and not at all recognizable in the current volume.

Crowley does sometimes appear to recognize that the feminism, egalitarianism, Keynesianism and "social justice" rhetoric, which he despises, emerged throughout the post-1960 western world. And occasionally there are hints that he knows that trends in the role of government have been quite similar in the many members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that do not have a Quebec problem. (The most careful

It is remarkable that a book that is ostensibly about changing Canadian values presents no survey data whatsoever to support Crowley's many large assertions.

available study of the relative size of government in Canada and the United States concludes, for example, that "real government spending relative to real aggregate income as of 2003 was virtually the same in the two countries, at about 27 percent of real GDP."<sup>1</sup>) However, none of that is allowed to intrude on the narrative. And the historic fact that Canada's surge of social policy activism in the 1960s and early '70s (when medicare, the Canadian and Quebec pension plans, unemployment insurance and the Canada Assistance Plan were passed) was the price the Liberal minority governments of the day paid for NDP support likewise does not fit neatly into the story line and is therefore ignored totally.

Readers who like facts will be distressed by Crowley's eclectic mix of sources (for example, an unknown civil servant's opinion on the percentage of federal government spending that is wasteful), and because his assertions are, at important points, wildly wrong (such as regarding the government's impact on the income share of the bottom 40 percent). Those who like consistency of argument will often find themselves baffled—wondering why, for example, Crowley advocates opening immigration to "any potential immigrant who can get a formal job offer from a Canadian employer" after concluding two pages earlier that greater immigration has negligible benefits for per capita income growth. And parts of the book are just loopy—the argument that "the desire of its citizens to make more little citizens to populate its future is a measure of a society's happiness" (which doubtless explains why in 2008 the birth rate per 1,000 population was 45.8 in Afghanistan, 37.8 in Gaza and only 11.1 in Canada).

The book's target market is likely, however, to focus more on Crowley's opinions on day care (against) and parents' rights to administer corporal

punishment (for)—and on his fulminations on the evils of "pseudo-work" (most of government, the East Coast inshore fishery and sociology professors). Nevertheless, he does make some true assertions and points us to some important choices.

When Crowley argues that paid employment is important for much more than money—for self-esteem, personal happiness and maintaining functional norms of family life—no Keynesians would disagree. They would just note that firms have to have jobs on offer if workers are to get them. The current recession is a pointed reminder (to all but the most ideological) that the demand side of labour markets matters, and that jobs do not automatically appear in sufficient numbers to prevent unemployment.

Crowley is also absolutely right in arguing that labour shortages, when and if they emerge, will have pervasive impacts on both social norms and economic processes. I agree with him that labour shortages are "a worker's best friend" in obtaining job improvements and that "the best social program is still a labour shortage" (even if I cannot understand how his summary of the many benefits of future labour shortages fits with the gloomy rhetoric of his introduction or with his advocacy of unrestricted immigration in Chapter 9).

Which makes it a pity that Crowley's perception that macroeconomic context matters crucially for social policy success is not followed up with a discussion of Canada's macroeconomic policy choices. The crucially important role that the Bank of Canada's interest rate policy plays in maintaining growth in aggregate demand and total employment is a topic ignored in the current volume—and Canada will face tough choices in future years if the U.S. decides to inflate its way out of its current unemployment and debt problems.

Crowley is also right to note that the Canadian self-image as the "kinder and gentler" part of North America is a national myth of relatively recent manufacture. This self-conception may have, since about 1970, helped English-speaking Canadians find a somewhat smug sense of distinctiveness from Americans, but Crowley's read of Canada's earlier social policy record is broadly accurate. "Colder and harder" is a better description of Canada, compared to the United States, until well into the 1960s. Canadians did not, for example, get CPP/QPP until 1967, some 32 years after Americans got social security, and Canada's lower rate and depth of poverty are a strictly post-1970 phenomenon, which coincided with the growth of government transfers that Crowley deplors.

But history does matter and time does only run in one direction. Back in the colder, harder Canada

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of the 1930s to '50s to which Crowley would like us to return, anglo Canadians could look to being part of a British empire on which the sun never set for their sense of national identity—a self-definition as essentially British that reinforced traditions of deference to regal authority dating back to the original United Empire Loyalist settlers. Among French Canadians, there was a similarly long-lasting tradition of deference to a conservative Catholic clergy. In both English and French Canada, social cohesion was also partly the product of a homogeneity and a casual racism that we should not air-brush out of the picture—there was, for example, no chorus of public protest when Canada's government denied entry to Jewish refugees from Nazism in the 1930s. Aboriginal Canadians on reserves did not have the vote until 1960 and immigration from China, India and other non-white areas was not allowed until the *Immigration Act* reforms of 1967.

The influence of these traditional values weakened during the 1950s, and during the 1960s the British empire and clerical domination of Quebec both disappeared forever. Waves of multicoloured immigration were allowed and Canada's old self-images of national identity did not fit any more—so the “kinder and gentler” narrative filled a gap, and has done so for more than 40 years now. What are the chances that Canadians will soon want to trade colder and harder for kinder and gentler?

However flawed Crowley's book may be, its importance lies in prompting a discussion of just what exactly our values are and how they might be expressed in public policy. And sitting behind that debate is the deeper question of who “we” will be and what exactly is the glue that holds a country together.

The survey data on social values are very clear that in Canada, as in other countries, there is on average a generalized preference for greater equality of economic outcome and a lot of skepticism about the prevailing degree of equality of opportunity. Countries differ somewhat, but when asked whether “inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful” the average respondent's answer is to agree mildly, in Canada as elsewhere. When respondents were asked “knowing the right people—how important is that for getting ahead in life?” the average response everywhere lay somewhere between “very important” and “somewhat important”<sup>2</sup>

However, the data also show that for every average response there is a range of opinions and that individuals often have a complex, and sometimes self-contradictory, mix of opinions and values. And a constant of the survey design literature is the observation that framing matters—whether a glass is described as half full or half empty does affect attitudes and behaviour.

Which is really the reason Crowley wrote this book. His perspective is not the detachment of the ivory tower academic who wishes only to describe events. I rather imagine instead that he would agree with the inscription on Karl Marx's tomb—“The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways—the point however is to change it.” Crowley's objective is not to describe “a traditionalist juggernaut gathering force across this land,” but rather to encourage it by reframing the social choices facing Canadians and thereby shaping the evolution of Canadian values.

Personally, I think that it is a tough time to

be a market fundamentalist. The International Monetary Fund may have been saying for nearly a year that we have had the “most dangerous shock in mature financial markets since the 1930s” and are now in the deepest recession since World War Two, but there is little trace of that in this book. Aside from a half-dozen pages in Chapter 1 that gamely attempt to argue that it is all the fault of government, and quite inconsequential to longer term trends, the Great Recession of 2008 to 20?? does not get a mention.

But big economic downturns do shape events. The Depression enabled Roosevelt's New Deal, the passage of social security in 1935 and a permanent expansion of government's role in the United

## The Canadian self-image as the “kinder and gentler” part of North America is a national myth of relatively recent manufacture.

States. The 2009 stimulus package of the Obama administration, and the expansion of government it embodies, would likewise be unthinkable without the present economic crisis—and the Obama administration is also hard at work lessening Canada's continental distinctiveness by expanding government's role in the U.S. healthcare system and tilting taxation in a more redistributive direction. Worldwide, the merits of financial sector regulation and the virtues of an adequate social safety net are now much more appreciated than they were just two short years ago. Even the Harper government in Canada has been forced by the pressure of real events into a more activist role—expanding EI benefits, running budget deficits, assuming part ownership role of General Motors and Chrysler and generally going in exactly the opposite direction to Crowley's “traditionalist juggernaut.”

So if the tide of events is not in fact now running in the direction Crowley points to, what will the impact of the book be? Who will read it, and how might it change their attitudes and behaviour?

Crowley assumes, throughout the book, that Canada will always maintain its current geographic borders (an odd assumption, if you think about it, for a book whose big idea is the implications of Quebec's possible separation). But although he starts by focusing his blame for Canada's presumed economic, social and moral decline after 1960 on federal government pandering to francophone Quebecers, by the end he is talking about a virtuous, productive “making nation” in the West and a transfer-dependent “taking nation” in the East. The clear implication of his initial argument is that the Rest of Canada would have been better off if Quebec had separated, but by the end his book reads like a manifesto for western separatism.

Which is presumably where it will sell best—there is not much of a market for this sort of stereotyping in either Quebec or Atlantic Canada. Nor will there be many sales to anyone with even a minor degree of infection by the viruses of feminism or environmentalism or social justice—and once one writes off all those people, one is pretty much left with the same core group who have always hated seeing French on their cereal boxes.

Every polemicist who sits down to write has to start with a strategic decision—whether to try to energize the existing base or to reach out to potential converts. The scornful putdowns and hyperbolic insults that true believers lap up form a style of rhetoric that offers no respect to alternative

points of view. But the reason why some people have not yet been converted to the true faith is because they have doubts, because they currently find other points of view to be at least somewhat convincing—so they are turned off by full bore denigration of ideas that they are not so sure are wrong.

Crowley writes well and has a lively turn of phrase—it may perhaps be because he cannot stop himself from castigating his dim-witted, venal and pusillanimous ideological foes that this ends up being a book that the base will love and nobody else will read. Or it may be a conscious and quite strategic decision—at a time when unemployment is rising and untrammelled faith in global markets is being widely questioned—to try to rally the discouraged members of his flock around the vision of a greener pasture of labour shortages over the hill, not now visible in the debris of the current recession.

A predictable cost of all this energizing of the base is, however, an increasing degree of inter-regional nastiness in our national political culture—as might be expected when one starts with the premise that all our problems can be traced to an “excess” influence of a particular region of the country and will only be solved when that region becomes politically irrelevant. LRC

### NOTES

- 1 J. Stephen Ferris and Stanley L. Winer (2007), “Just How Much Bigger Is Government in Canada? A Comparative Analysis of the Size and Structure of the Public Sectors in Canada and the United States, 1929–2004,” *Canadian Public Policy* volume 33, number 2, pages 173–206.
- 2 See Lars Osberg and Tim Smeeding (2006), “Fair’ Inequality? Attitudes to Pay Differentials: The United States in Comparative Perspective,” *American Sociological*

“We selected our sticks from the rack and took to the ice for a ‘gentleman's game’: no raising the puck, no checking. It didn't take long for the first contact to be made.”  
Richard Harrison

“I don't know why the singing sparrow, the sway of sea oats, the sifting sand on a windswept beach and the beautiful eyes of a wild duck have such restorative powers, but they do.”  
Lesley Choyce



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