Canada and the Bicentennial of the American Constitution

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This year marks the beginning of celebrations to mark the bicentennial of the American Constitution. At first glance this hardly appears an event of particular interest to Canadians. The constitutions of Canada and the United States, like the nations themselves, are unique and reflect different political, social and philosophical antecedents. Canadians have their own distinct history, culture, and political institutions.

At the same time American politics has often exerted a strong influence north of the border. Sir John A. Macdonald was well informed about the American constitution when he and other Fathers of Confederation sat down to discuss Canadian union in the 1860s. Macdonald's copy of Madison's "Draft Constitution for the United States" is still extant with his own penciled notations in favour of a strong central government. Although a staunch monarchist Sir John A. was never one of those who, in the wake of the American Civil War, dismissed the American constitution as a failure. He called it "one of the most skillful works which human intelligence ever created" and made many references to it in his arguments to create an even better constitution for Canada. Neither Macdonald or anyone else could have anticipated the forces that have brought about such a high degree of interdependence between the two nations over the past several decades.

Despite this close relationship Canadians frequently complain about being taken for granted or are shocked by the average American's limited knowledge of Canada. On the other hand we often mistakenly think we understand American politics because we are familiar with its popular culture. But there are relatively few scholars, journalists or politicians who have a profound understanding of the American political system. The bicentennial is an opportunity for Canadians to learn a little more about political institutions in the United States and, at the same time, work toward raising the consciousness of Americans about Canadian politics. The task is not easy but the job of redefining our relations with the Americans is too important to be left to a few experts on the free trade negotiating team or representatives in the Department of External Affairs and other departments.

Another reason for following bicentennial activities with some interest is that in just four years citizens in Canada's two largest provinces have a bicentennial of their own. The first legislative assemblies of Upper and Lower Canada (now Ontario and Quebec) were created by the *Constitution Act* (1791). While British colonies such as Nova Scotia already had representative government, the *Constitution Act* was an important step in Canada's political development and no doubt some appropriate projects will be undertaken to mark the event. As suggested in the article by Roger Davidson, close observation of the American experience may help us to learn from their successes and avoid some pitfalls.

In general Canada and the United States tend to approach similar political issues from different perspectives. It is often useful to see how someone else deals with questions such as representation by population (this issue) or jurisdiction over legislative buildings (next issue). In the past we have have published articles on Parliament and Congress, on televising Congressional proceedings, on staffing in American legislatures, on lobbying and on many aspects of American politics. Despite differences in the two political systems there is always much to be learned about ourselves by keeping a close eye on the Americans.

Finally, a bicentennial, whether Canadian or American, offers an opportunity for individuals in the two countries to think beyond short term issues and reflect upon about the future political relationships between the two countries. Two hundred years from now will the traditional reasons for separate and independent countries still exist? The argument for Canadian independence is made most eloquently by a former American in the interview which appears in this issue. But in the long term have not other separate peoples worked out different political arrangements that might well be better suited to the peculiar relationship that exists between Canadians and Americans? The European Common market is the obvious example but what about England and Scotland, France and Monaco or even Puerto Rico and the USA!

Perhaps constitutional reformers inspired by the present and upcoming bicentennial in the two countries will turn their attention away from debate over the merits of increasing the length of the congressional terms or agonizing over whether Quebec signs the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms and look at the larger question of whether there is any constitutional arrangement that would satisfy the political, social, cultural linguistic and economic aspirations of all individuals who share the North American continent.

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