

Book review

Are Canadians that much different from Americans?

By REGINALD STUART

What is Canada anyway? Ask any 10 Canadians to define our national identity in 25 words or fewer for a dream vacation and most would likely remain at home. Canadians tend not to describe themselves very well. But ask how we compare with the United States, and a cascade of negatives - we are not republicans, not risk-takers, not as conservative, not as violent - would pour forth.

The Canada-U.S. free-trade debate of 1988 aroused reflex Canadian fears of a muscular, aggressive America that, given an open door, would smother Canada's feeble culture and independence. Such fearmongers undercut themselves on that occasion. In *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (C.D. Howe Institute, 326 pages, \$15, paperback), Seymour Martin Lipset, who delves far back into history, reassures all but incorrigible anti-American Canadians that our cultural, economic and political sovereignty will endure.

The Canadian-American Committee, a private organization, regularly publishes reports on such economic matters as trade laws, global trade patterns and auto policies. It broke tradition and enticed one of America's premier sociologists to compare at length our two countries' values and institutions. Not an elegant writer, Lipset is nonetheless clear, insistent and generally persuasive. General readers, teachers, academics and politicians on both sides of the border will find this book valuable.

Lipset argues that two contrasting social ideas emerged after 1783 from the turmoil of the American War for Independence. Revolutionary liberal individualism confronted counter-revolutionary Toryism, which stressed loyalty, the community and social order. These founding creeds defined, with broad consistency, how each country would evolve and behave. So Lipset juxtaposes a liberal, individualistic and populist United States and reserved, deferential and group-

oriented Canada sharing North America in 1989.

THREE SURPRISES

Lipset tests his thesis in two phases. First, he develops themes, such as ideology, religion, economics. Second, he compares his general thematic observations against recent opinion poll data. No surprise that all the themes reflect the founding creeds. Three major surprises emerge, however, in the observations.

First, we have not tied ourselves to a sagging giant. America's economy remains the most productive in the world, whatever its global trade balances. Second, Lipset believes that Canadians over-estimate American domination of our culture. Our two countries are closer economically than at any time in history, yet Canadian culture has never been more vital, and vibrant. Third, he says we invest more in the United States than the reverse. Canadians do control their own economy through government and tightly woven native elite. The "branch-plant thesis" will not wash. Lipset is convinced that free trade will not deflect this broad trend.

At the same time, he believes that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a watershed for Canadian-American convergence in the concept of judicial review. The Charter is not a Bill of Rights. But on the evidence so far, we have stepped quickly towards American reliance on judicial supremacy and individual litigiousness. I think this is an important insight.

While on convergence, I would add our recent infatuation with

special interest lobbies in politics and draw in Lipset's own example of America's edging into multiculturalism, one of Canada's principal social values. Americans may on that score recognize bilingualism as a permanent feature of life, instead of a way-station on the road to an all-English speaking society. Lipset struggles, however, to sustain divergences regarding our attitudes to newcomers, which have been more alike historically than he realizes, differences notwithstanding.

Lipset produces no surprises on our approaches to the relationship of church and state, our literary expression, and on how we manage social welfare and philanthropy. To take the last theme, individualism and a suspicion of government power have led Americans to rely largely on voluntarism. Canadians expect our governments to maintain a universal welfare system, although calls for "user fees" increase in our debates over health care.

LINKAGE

The author restates his case for

socialism's failure in America's individualistic politics, contrasted with its relative success in Canada. He maintains that our group orientation and collective sense created a logical, if likely, spiritual linkage between Toryism and socialism.

Canada and the United States are remarkably similar societies with parallel pasts. We should not forget, however, that although our histories both began nearly 300 years ago, Canada's colonial status continued for almost a century after America's independence.

The contexts within which the two countries became independent were vastly different. And Lipset fully recognizes, but does not integrate into his analysis, the significance of French-English differences in Canada.

Furthermore, Lipset often admits to variations rather than sharp divergences in our mutual values and institutional structures. And after examples of both, is it entirely fair to see Canada and the United States as two trains running on parallel tracks?

In general, yes. The two national cultures seem strong enough to maintain respective identities, whatever their similarities. Without dwelling on what we might find appalling about each other, Lipset questions whether our varying values and institutions are sufficient to keep the trains from colliding or using a single set of rails. He believes they are. Not all Canadians will be convinced, so we must wait and see.

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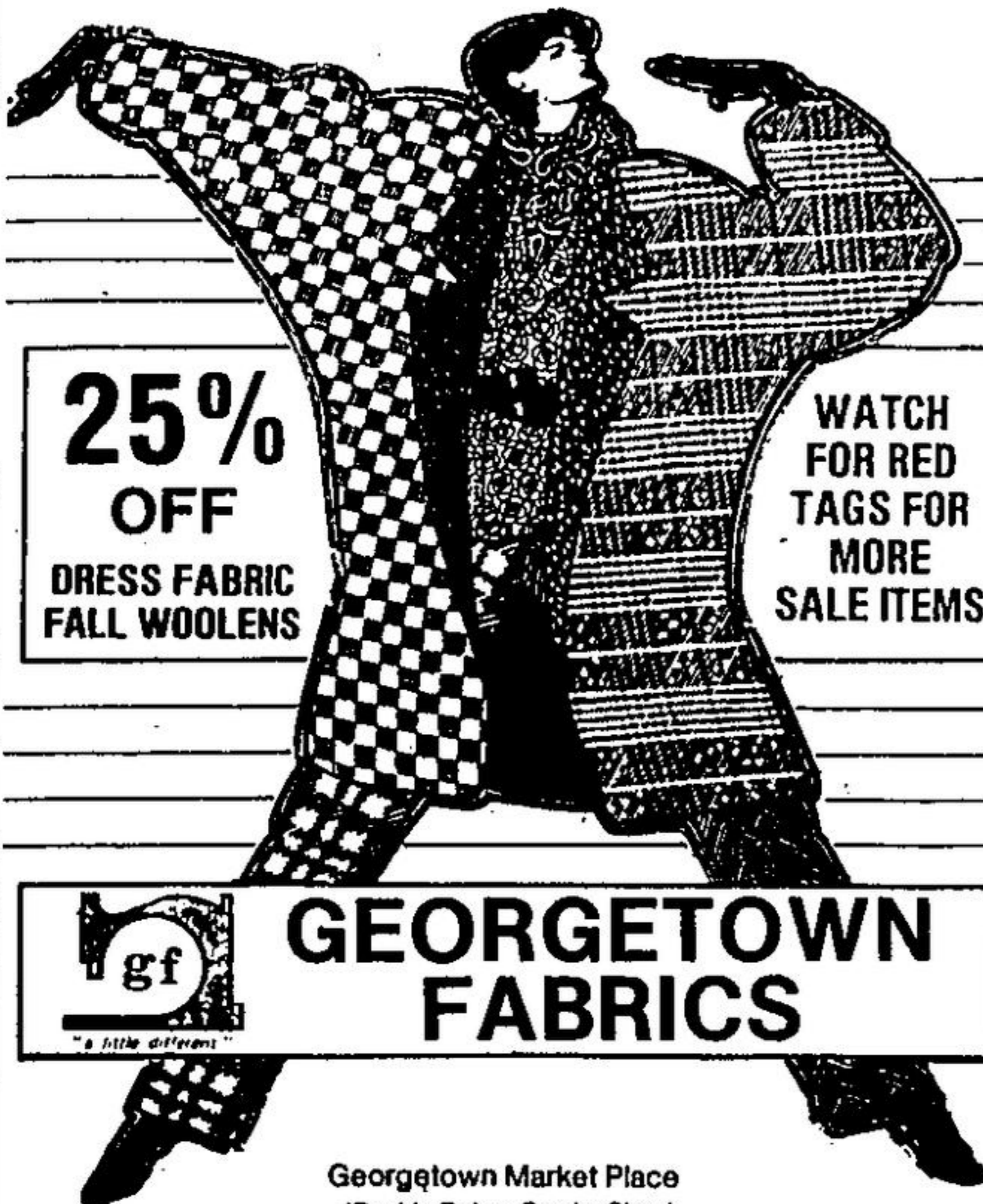
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