

# DRINK CANADA DRY

As a foreign correspondent for the CBC, Joe Schlesinger developed a strong love for Canada by spending nearly half of his career elsewhere



That I am here, that I am what I am, did what I did and have what I have, my family, love and happiness—I owe all of it to the day I arrived in Canada 60 years ago as a refugee from Communist Czechoslovakia.

I landed at Quebec City by ship on a sunny day in June 1950. What I remember best is the inscription above the docks that greeted us. It wasn't an inspirational welcome, such as "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses." Nothing like that. The message was direct and businesslike. It read "Drink Canada Dry."<sup>1</sup>

Quite a tall order!

Trouble was that trying to obey the commandment proved exceedingly difficult. Not, as I first thought, because there would be just too much booze around to drink the country dry, but rather, as I found out as I headed across Canada to Vancouver, because it was so difficult, sometimes even impossible, just to get a drink.

No alcohol on the train west. And when, during a stopover in Winnipeg, I got off to get a drink with a young woman I had met on the train, we were stopped at the door of the pub. The waiter pointed to a sign that said "Ladies, minors and animals not allowed." I had run into my first of the quaint Canadian drinking regulations of the day: the segregated men-only section of pubs.

More surprises awaited me in Vancouver. No alcohol in restaurants. No cocktail bars.

Pubs served only beer and no food, not even a peanut or a pretzel. To make the pub experience even more joyless, the decor and furnishings were so austere unwelcoming as to send a clear message: "Guzzle up and get

out!" And on Sundays, not a drop to drink anywhere. It was, to say the least, confusing.

A country's drinking habits are hardly the main determinant of the nature of a society. But they do provide a useful clue. In Canada's case, the drinking taboos spoke of a culture of conformity and caution that discouraged conviviality.

Those first impressions, though, were quickly contradicted by other experiences. For one thing, most of the people I met were friendly and even warm. And there was an informality that, compared to the rigid social codes of much of Europe, was refreshing, such as people calling each other by their first names at the drop of a hat.

I obviously had a lot to learn about this new, strange country and decided that I would do it as quickly as possible. Well, 60 years later I'm still at it. But I have learned a thing or two and I'd like to share some of that with you.

Much of what I have learned about Canada I picked up not here, but by spending nearly half of the past six decades living and working the world over. What I found out about foreign countries and cultures helped me see my own country in context.

Argentina is a prime example. A hundred years ago, Argentina was considered a land of opportunity as promising as North America. Like Canada, the country had everything: lots of land, natural riches, wheat and meat, intelligent and diligent people. And it had two great competitive advantages over Canada: a kinder climate, and even more important, its riches, unlike Canada's, lay within easy reach of the sea. No long, costly hauls by rail, as in Canada,

to get beef and grain to overseas markets.

Over the past 50 years, though, even as Canada has grown ever more prosperous, Argentina has gone disastrously downhill. Where once Canadians and Argentinians enjoyed similar incomes, Canada's per capita GDP is now almost five times higher than Argentina's.

The reasons for Argentina's decline are many. The most basic, though, is the fact that Argentinians started out on the wrong foot. As the country was being developed in the late 19th century, too much land went to too few people. Where the Canadian prairie was settled by immigrants who owned and farmed the land, in Argentina the rich and powerful parcelled out the land among themselves. Immigrants brought in to work the land were exploited as sharecroppers with no political rights. The result: a country haunted by social inequalities that have left it cursed with violent upheavals.

Travelling around the world also helps dispel some of the *idées fixes* we have about ourselves and the country. One of those persistent beliefs is that the differences between French and English, easterners and westerners make this country so difficult to govern.

Our differences, I would suggest, are, by the standards of European countries, rather tame. Prussians and Bavarians have highly distinct cultures, and they've fought wars against each other, wars much longer and fiercer than the battle of the Plains of Abraham. So have the Italians for centuries. What's more, the differences between Newfoundlanders and British Columbians pale when compared, let's say, to those between Venetians and Sicilians.

As for Quebecers, they've fared much better with preserving their language and culture than the Bretons or Corsicans have in France. General Wolfe's victory in 1759 may, in fact, have saved Quebecers from sharing the fate of the Cajuns after Napoleon sold Louisiana to the Americans in 1803. Without Quebecers, in turn, and the links between Lower and Upper Canada, what the United Empire Loyalists had started might have petered out in a reconciliation with the American republic. And ergo, no Canada.

As successful as Canada has been, it's always been beset by the belief that the country is just too big to be governed from the centre. But size, like everything else, is relative. As the speed of travel and communication increases, countries shrink.

In olden times, it took days for a ruler to find

out what was happening in the further reaches of his territory, and days more, even weeks, before he could do something about it.

Napoleon solved the problem of centralized control by appointing surrogates, called prefects, to run the counties. These prefectures, which are still an important part of French governance, were designed in a way that would allow prefects to go to the furthest reaches of their counties and be back at home by nightfall.

As large as Canada is, these days a prime minister could leave Ottawa in the morning for Vancouver and be back in bed at home that night. Whether the country needs more centralization is, in the end, a matter for legitimate debate as long as we realize that the concept of the vastness of the country as a barrier to effective national governance has become somewhat outdated by the speed of travel and communications.

What is most striking, though, about this country of ours is the speed and profundity of change. Change, I should add, for the better. The country I came to in 1950, dominated by the protective parochialism of French Canadians and the often smug conformity of so much of English Canada, now barely exists.

The whole world has changed, of course. In this country, much of that change was driven by the waves of immigrants, millions of them from all parts of the world, that came crashing onto our shores. They brought with them new energy and ideas.

If immigrants helped change the coun-

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try, Canada also changed them. Out of this intermingling there arose the diversity of multiculturalism. While widely celebrated, multiculturalism is also often deplored. No wonder. The injection of new blood into a society cannot help but leave a few bruises.

Still, we've been spared the deep gashes of unrest that immigration has inflicted on other societies, most particularly in Europe. The main reason, of course, is that ours has always been a country of immigrants. And we have space, lots of it.

We've got used to immigrants turning Canadian society into an ever more intricate and

colourful mosaic. As these groups integrated into Canadian society, they inculcated it with a growing sense of empathy for outsiders.

On one front, though, Canada has failed. That is in its treatment of the country's Aboriginal inhabitants. The inequalities and many of the injustices persist still. Yet for all that, I can think of no better example of a virtue Canadians share than what happened in the Oka crisis nearly 20 years ago.

The Oka confrontation between Native people and Ottawa, and even more so between the Quebec authorities and the Mohawks, gripped the country for a whole summer. It started with the killing of a Quebec police officer when Mohawks occupied land to protest the building of a golf course on what they considered their tribal burial grounds.

Masked Mohawk warriors and soldiers of the Canadian army confronted each other for week after week. Yet for all the guns and all the eye-to-eye macho posturing and provocation, no one else was killed.

As I watched from my post in Europe, it seemed almost unbelievable that the protest dragged on for so long without a major blood-letting. In other places, it would in all probability have ended violently. Not just in Iraq or Sudan. South of the border they would have had the National Guard and SWAT teams called in there, and before long there might have been a shootout, another Attica massacre perhaps, or an equivalent to the Waco inferno.

Oka, to me, signalled a Canadian quality of

forbearance, an ability to handle the country's discontents and divisions in a civilized manner. It seemed almost as though the "peace and order" concept of our national slogan had become part of our national DNA. In other words, a country to be proud of.

So let us raise our glasses to salute Canada, my Canada. And while it's necessary to remember that Canada still can't be drunk dry, everything else, take it from me, is possible in this country of ours. So drink up, fellow Canadians. Drink your fill from the well of Canada's unlimited possibilities and bright future. ■

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<sup>1</sup>This was an advertising slogan for Canada Dry ginger ale.