**Canada is not a country.**

Scott Gilmore: If our rag tag federation can’t build pipelines, move beer or find some common bonds, we may have a fatal problem

by Scott Gilmore

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I want to fly up to northern Manitoba next month to visit my parents. It’s not a long flight; I live in the province next door and with a connection in Winnipeg I can do the trip in an afternoon.

It is expensive though. For the same amount of money I could fly to Peru and back three times and still have change left over for some inflight duty free. I could fly to any state in America, any country in Europe, a dozen cities in Africa, and almost every country in Asia (North Korea and Timor Leste excepted).

I normally just wince and buy the ticket, knowing that this is just the way it is in Canada. But this time I stopped and considered how odd it is that I live in country where it is easier, cheaper and often faster to travel overseas than it is to do so domestically. And once I started pulling on that thread, several other things started to unravel.

Douglas Coupland once described British Columbia as part of a “cultural Chile”, a west coast community that ran from San Diego to Prince Rupert, tied together with an integrated economy, a similar lifestyle and a common worldview. Growing up in Alberta, this resonated with me, as I felt I had more in common with someone in Montana than I did with a Montrealer or a Haligonian, two cities I had never even visited.

Whether Canada’s cultural communities run north-south into the United States is less important than the fact they do not run east-west. We often talk about the “two solitudes”, based on the idea that French and Anglo Canadians live very different and unconnected lives. This is indisputable. We watch different shows, listen to different music (name any of the current top 10 musicians in Quebec), hold different values. If you don’t believe that last point, consider any public opinion survey—Quebec is an outlier on nearly every question from abortion to world affairs.

But there are other solitudes, too. Less than 10 per cent of Canadians have ever visited the north. And those who have come from only a handful of cities, such as Winnipeg. Remove the language, and there are fewer cultural similarities between Newfoundland and Saskatchewan than you would find between France and Belgium. What is more, the proportion of Regina residents who have actually been to St. John’s is a fraction of the Parisians who have been to Brussels (or Berlin).

Stephen Harper anointed Quebec a nation. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has announced that Indigenous Canadians are a nation. Conceivably a future prime minister may continue the trend and for some political advantage describe Maritimers as a nation, or South Asian Canadians as separate cultural identity. And why not? No one has ever successfully argued that Canadians are a people.

We do not even pass the most rudimentary test of a nation as those “united by common descent, history, culture, or language”. As the current PM himself has said “There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada.”

And, it is increasingly difficult to argue that Canada is a state, or at least a strong one. Being a Canadian citizen does not always entitle you the right to work or study in another province. It does not even allow you to carry a few cases of beer across a provincial border. Goods and people move far more freely within the European Union than they do within this country.

And that is not simply a choice made by the federal government. It has always been too weak to assert its alleged authority over the provinces. Yes, you can argue that legally Ottawa could knock down these barriers, could allow an Ontario carpenter to work in Quebec for example. But in truth, every federal government has lacked the political power to do so.

Some definitions of statehood refer to having a monopoly on violence. We meet that criteria: there is only one Canadian military. But it has atrophied to the point that our Navy is no longer able to fully assert sovereignty over our maritime boundaries, and our Army doesn’t even make an attempt in the Arctic.

And, in one important regard, Ottawa is perhaps not even a legitimate power. Consider that fully democratic governments are only found in provinces and cities, not at the federal level. There are no un-elected, unaccountable lawmakers in our provincial legislatures and our city halls. Thank god.

The world needs more Canada. This cliché is well used around here. We love to revel in our progress as a “post-national” state. But, it’s possible that as Canada evolved from geographically proximate European colonies to whatever we are now (a rag tag federation that can’t build pipelines or move beer) we skipped right over the “national” stage.

So if Canada is not a people, not a nation, possibly not even a nation state, what are we? I would argue we are merely a collection of people who happen to be moving in roughly the same direction. Occasionally we have a leader who marshals us together, to walk in one particular direction, or to march to a specific rhythm. But only occasionally, and never for long. No, we remain the same colour on the map not because of a strong sense of shared identity or a common purpose, but because we simply haven’t had much of a reason to split up. Yet.

So far, this nationhood by happenstance has worked out for us. Our quality of life is one of the highest in the world. A recent survey ranked those of us who live here as among the happiest. We have had a couple of brushes with dissolution, but survived and the future looks good. Until the day when suddenly it doesn’t.

One lesson that the last 20 years has reinforced is that there are far more black swan moments, completely unanticipated game-changing events, out there than we realize. It is almost inevitable that this country is one day going to face some unexpected shock. It could be the rise of another charismatic, iconoclastic, regional politician who points to Ottawa as the source of all that is wrong. It could be an economic crisis that dramatically pits one region against another. Perhaps it might even be a technological advance that changes our culture in ways we cannot even imagine now.

When that day comes, we may realize that we took  for granted those few ties that bound us, and we did far too little to add to them and to draw them tighter.

I was once told by someone wiser than me that a successful marriage requires a constant effort to find connections—the relationship must be continually maintained and strengthened. Because otherwise, when the bad times inevitably arrive, it will be too late. I feel this may apply to Canada. These are sunny days. But the weather will change. And when our storm arrives, we may discover that Canada was never really a country after all.