

'O Canada' and the Two Solitudes

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We should speak not of one "O Canada" but of the two O Canadas, which represent the two solitudes of English and French Canada. The original French lyrics of Sir Adolphe-Basile Routhier and the English lyrics of Sir Robert Stanley Weir bear no resemblance to each other. The French lyrics celebrate the French Fact and commemorate a glorious crusade to Christianize North America with lines like "he knows to carry the sword; he knows to carry the cross" and "valour steeped in faith"; in contrast, the English lyrics appeal to a Loyalist patriotism, where the "true" in "True North" suggests the virtues of steadfastness and loyalty.

Parliament adopted Routhier's original French text of "O Canada" and a modified version of Weir's English version of "O Canada" as the official national anthem through the National Anthem Act of 1980. The English lyrics derived from the modifications that a Special Joint Committee of the House of Commons and Senate had recommended to Weir's poem in 1967. The two O Canadas, and the English translation of the French lyrics, are as follows:

*O Canada!
Our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide,
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.*

*O Canada!
Terre de nos aïeux,
Ton front est ceint de fleurons glorieux!
Car ton bras sait porter l'épée,
Il sait porter la croix!
Ton histoire est une épopée*

*Des plus brillants exploits.
Et ta valeur, de foi trempée,
Protégera nos foyers et nos droits.
Protégera nos foyers et nos droits.*

Translation:

*O Canada,
land of our ancestors
Glorious deeds circle your brow
For your arm knows how to wield the sword
Your arm knows how to carry the cross;
Your history is an epic
of brilliant deeds
And your valour steeped in faith
will protect our homes and our rights,
Will protect our homes and our rights.*

Weir's original poem from 1908 said:

*O Canada!
Our home, our native land.
True patriot love thou dost in us command.
We see thee rising fair, dear land,
The True North strong and free;
And Stand on guard,
O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.*

IN 1914, WEIR ENDORSED AN alteration that had first appeared the previous year and changed the line "True patriot love thou dost in us command" to "True patriot love in all thy sons command." "True patriot love thou dost in us command" is a second-person declarative sentence written in a poetic style where the object comes before the subject and verb. "Thou", the second-person singular subject pronoun, refers to Canada. In standard English syntax, the sentence would say, "Canada, thou dost command true patriot love in us." The lyrics "True patriot

love in all thy sons command” retains the poetic syntax, where the object comes before the subject and verb, but this second-person imperative sentence contains only an implied subject, which would still be, “You, Canada.” As a declarative sentence, it would say, “Canada, thou commandest true patriot love in all thy sons.” The phrase “True patriot love in all of us command” follows the same grammatical structure as the line that it will replace, though the last prepositional phrase shifts from the third person (“in all thy sons”), which sounds reverential, to the first person plural (“in all of us”), which sounds wilful. Its declarative form betrays its prosaic and bland character: “Canada, you command true patriot love in all of us.” And it certainly also sounds worse and less poetic.

Bill C-210, *An Act to Amend the National Anthem Act*, could soon receive Royal Assent and alter the wording of the English version of “O Canada” in order, as its proponents say, to make the wording gender-neutral. As such, “True patriot love in all thy sons command” will become “True patriot love in all of us command.” This bill has succeeded where its previous iterations, going back to at least the 35th Parliament (1994-97), have all died on the Order Paper. However, it stands to reason that it will not be the last bill to alter the wording of the English lyrics. The original French lyrics have been accorded the privilege of standing the test of time, but the English lyrics will now be subject to continual modification.

Bill C-210 and its antecedents

Over the last twenty years, parliamentarians have introduced seven bills to alter “O Canada,” and six of them pertained to replacing the English lyrics “True patriot love in all thy sons command” with “True patriot love in all of us command.” The other called for creating a third official bilingual amalgam anthem. Ultimately, the wording “True patriot love in all of us command” first emanated from a motion of Toronto City Council in 1990, which also suggested that “Our home and native land” be altered to “Our home and cherished land.”

Senator Vivienne Poy, who retired from the upper house in 2012, introduced a bill in 2002 to make the same change as the current legis-

lation; it died on the Order Paper, and she re-introduced it in 2003. Poy emphasized from the outset that her bill did not propose to alter the French “O Canada,” nor would it strike out the reference to God, but would merely change “thy sons command” to “in all of us command” for the sake of being “inclusive of more than 50 per cent of the population.” Senator Poy praised other organizations for having already “chang[ed] their use of language in order to make everyone feel that they belong in the community.” When one of her fellow-Senators asked her why her bill did not propose to alter the French lyrics, Poy replied that she wouldn’t presume to do so because she did not know the French language well enough. Senator Janis Johnson acknowledged that “the French-language version of the lyrics ... contains non-inclusive language as well.” But she supported keeping the French lyrics intact on the grounds that “the first verse in French does not include any questionable lyrics from a gender perspective.”

SENATOR NICHOLAS TAYLOR ARGUED that Poy’s bill did not go far enough in altering the English lyrics. He argued that the bill should change the phrase “Our home and native land” to “Our home or native land,” which would better include and acknowledge naturalized Canadian citizens who were born in other countries and for whom Canada was not, strictly speaking, their native land. Senator Eymard Corbin characterized the French “O Canada” as “a religious and military text.” Senator Laurier LaPierre added, “The words of the French anthem are horribly threatening and frightening. They reflect the destruction of an entire way of life.” They both opposed Poy’s bill. Finally, Senator Joan Fraser provided the most cogent critique by exposing the bill’s unequal treatment of the English and French O Canadas. Why should the English lyrics of “O Canada” not recognize other groups, besides Canadian women, such as “aboriginal people and immigrants and fisherman and bankers and software engineers?” Fraser added, “French-speaking Canadians still sing, in “O Canada,” of the cross and the sword, [...] not because they want to turn Canada into a theocracy or military dictatorship, but because these are the words that have been sung for gen-

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erations.”

In 2003, Senator Noel Kinsella tabled a bill that would have made a bilingual amalgam of the two O Canadas a third official anthem. His bill would have neatly side-stepped the issue of “True patriot love in all thy sons command” because the first two and one-half lines of this bilingual anthem opted for the French lyrics. Senator Richard Kroft asked his colleague whether his bill should consider altering “the French-language version of “O Canada,” particularly in terms of gender and religious sensitivity” because, in his view, Parliament could make it “more broadly acceptable and reflective of the nature of his country as well.” Senator Kinsella never answered whether he would favour altering the French lyrics, and his bill also died on the Order Paper.

The late Mauril Bélanger introduced Bill C-210 for Second Reading on 6 May 2016 and declared that replacing “thy sons” with “of us” would finally “give Canada an inclusive anthem that respects what we were and what we have become as a country” – as if this were the alpha and omega, the first and the last word, and that Parliament would never alter the anthem hereafter now that it had achieved “inclusiveness.”

It is curious that a French-speaking MP like Bélanger, who made a name for himself opposing the Harris government’s plan to close the French-speaking Montfort Hospital in Ottawa, would table a bill to alter the text of the English “O Canada.” Similarly, it would be strange – and probably very poorly received – if an English-speaking parliamentarian introduced a bill to alter the lyrics of “O Canada” in the original French. For instance, the Charlottetown Accord would have guarded against such communal intrusions by drawing upon the old Double Majority Convention of the Province of Canada (1841-1867) and creating a new category of “legislation materially affecting French language or culture” in the Senate.

New Democratic MP Sheila Malcolmson made an unintentionally revealing comment on the daunting prospect of altering the French lyrics. She praised Bill C-210, declaring – as if with great relief – that “the French lyrics do not need to change, so, as we know in Canada, that makes

it simpler.” Not content at merely expressing her relief, Malcolmson lavished the original French “O Canada” with great praise: “The French version does have gender neutral language, and it has since 1880. Its words have not changed since then. The French are very evolved, very ahead of their time.” And by “French,” surely she meant French-Canadians and not the inhabitants of France, who had nothing to do with writing Routhier’s lyrics. New Democratic MP Christine Moore explained, in French: “When we talk about correcting the English version, we are really talking about correcting an adaptation of the French version.” Parliament needed to “correct” the imperfect English lyrics, which have presumably been wrong for 103 years, but the French lyrics pose no problem whatsoever. And Liberal MP Greg Fergus explained that “Bill C-210 is focused on the English version” of “O Canada” because “the French version is already gender neutral.”

SENATOR ANDRÉ PRATTE EXPRESSED the most egregious double standards of the debate. He insisted that we must interpret “thy sons” literally and argued that this phrase “has become out of step with what Canada has become.” However, he said the lyrics of the French “O Canada” should remain *intact* even though, in his estimation, they also no longer represent French-speaking Canadians:

So if you ask me whether the lyrics of our national anthem should remain unchanged, spontaneously, I would say yes. That is certainly the case for the French lyrics, even though they no longer reflect the secular and pacifist nature of most of today’s francophone Canadians.

Apparently, he interprets the lyrics to the French version metaphorically despite taking the English version literally. Pratte also dismissed the possibility that Parliament would in the future change the English lyrics again by altering the phrase “Our home and native land” or by removing references to God entirely even though some Senators have already discussed doing so. He likened adopting the gender neutral lyrics to replacing the Red Ensign with the Maple Leaf.

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SENATOR NANCY RUTH SPONSORED Bélanger's bill in the Senate and emphasized that the French lyrics "included women from the outset," and thereby concluded that they need not change. Senator Claudette Tardif made the same argument. As in 2002, Senator Joan Fraser again provided the most cogent critique. She pointed out that Parliament cannot extol the virtues of an anthem that includes lines on "bearing the sword and the cross" and "Your valour steeped in faith" simply because it happens to make no mention of persons of either sex. She added that the Catholic Crusade described in the French lyrics "is at least as offensive as the innocent phrase 'thy sons.'" She asked, "If we are going to change the national anthem every time we have a new version of what society looks like, why not do the whole thing?" Why not indeed.

Since the Liberals rushed Bill C-210 through the House of Commons as quickly as they could, the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage called only one witness, Chris Champion, as editor of *THE DORCHESTER REVIEW*. As he pointed out, the phrase "True patriot love in all thy sons command" drew upon an English poetic tradition dating back to at least 1611 with King James' *Authorized Translation of the Holy Bible* and to the works of Shakespeare wherein "sons" referred to all and not merely to persons of the male sex. He also noted that this quest for inclusivity will never end and that, by definition, all national anthems exclude anyone not a citizen of that country. Senator Fraser mounted a last stand against the bill on March 28 this year during the Third Reading *Debates*, denouncing "in all of us command" as "clunky, leaden and pedestrian" and "a fine example of what happens when you let politicians meddle."

Senator Fraser has pledged to continue adjourning debate on Bill C-210, *An Act to Amend the National Anthem Act*, in the Senate and thereby delay the final vote on Third Reading indefinitely and prevent it from gaining Royal Assent. But she could lose that war of attrition if a supporter of the bill calls for a vote during her absence. It would appear at the time of writing that if the bill manages to sneak through Third Reading, then the Trudeau government will ask the Governor General to give Royal Assent by Written Declaration in mid- to late-June so that

the new lyrics can be announced on Parliament Hill on July 1.

Champion also suggested to the committee that Bill C-210's quick passage through the House of Commons and Senate follows a distinct pattern of minimal study, little debate, and much obfuscation, on private members' bills pertaining to Canadian symbols and identity. For example, in 1982, a few Liberal and New Democratic MPs rushed a bill to rename Dominion Day as "Canada Day" through Second Reading, Committee, Report Stage, and Third Reading in only five minutes on a Friday afternoon at 4:30, even though only 13 MPs were present in the House of Commons at the time, and the *Constitution Act, 1867* sets the quorum of the House of Commons at 20. The Commons therefore invalidly passed the bill, but Speaker Jeanne Sauvé* allowed the bill to stand based on the dubious rationale that no one questioned the absence of quorum or the legitimacy of the debate at the time.

Devoting more time to debating the bill and conducting consultations, a cynic might suggest, would only have alerted the public to its existence and increased the potential for opposition to it. The Liberals learned from the Harper government's pledge to make the lyrics of the English anthem gender-neutral in the Speech from the Throne of 2010; this high-profile announcement generated significant backlash, and the Conservatives abandoned the idea "to ask Parliament to examine the original gender-neutral English wording of the national anthem" altogether. Mauril Bélanger had introduced an identical bill in the 2nd session of the 41st Parliament in September 2014; the Commons voted it down by 144 to 127 at Second Reading in April 2015. The Liberal majority in the 42nd Parliament, as well as the current Prime Minister's public declarations that he is a feminist, all but assured passage of the current bill, though not necessarily with such haste.

* Speaker of the House of Commons 1980-84; recommended for the office of Governor-General by P.E. Trudeau in 1984; served until 1990.

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WITHIN THE NEXT DECADE, IT is highly likely that an MP or Senator will introduce a private member's bill to alter the English lyrics again, along the lines of previous proposals, to replace "Our home and native land" to something like "our home and cherished land" on the grounds that the current wording is offensive and either mocks the land claims of First Nations or excludes naturalized citizens – or both. Such proposals date back to the Toronto City Council's motion in 1990, and Senator Nicholas Taylor advocated something similar in 2002. Senator Eggleton also asked Senator Ruth at committee if she would support changing "Home and native land" to "Home and cherished land," and she pointedly dismissed any discussion of altering the bill on the tautological grounds that they were not already in the bill.

It is also possible that a parliamentarian would propose to strike out the reference to God from the English lyrics, though such a bill would also have to modify the original French lyrics because they describe a veritable Crusade or mission civilisatrice to Christianize North America. The hypocrisy of cleansing only the English lyrics of God would be too heavy a cross to bear, as it were, and ultimately necessitate a complete re-write of the French lyrics, "steeped in [Catholic] faith" as they are and "carrying the cross" as they do. As such, making the English lyrics more inclusive to atheists is less likely than making it more inclusive to First Nations and naturalized Canadian citizens.

"O Canada" itself perfectly encapsulates the two solitudes of this country: the original French lyrics have remained unaltered since Routhier wrote them in 1880 — they are apparently sacrosanct — while Weir's English lyrics have always been subject to modification, questioning, and debate. Before 1982, the alterations to Weir's lyrics made them more poetic. After the Toronto City Council's motion from 1990, the debate has shifted to altering Weir's lyrics for ideological purposes. In some respects, the

two sets of lyrics represent the broader conceptions of history in Canada: French Canada's history remains unalterable, and certainly not open to debate by the Parliament of Canada, while the key symbols of English Canada's history can always be rubbished, modified, tampered with, or replaced.

Ironically, this double standard persists despite the French-language media's apathy and indifference. Radio-Canada has provided only the most perfunctory coverage of the "in all of us" bill and never acknowledged the double standard of changing the English lyrics while granting the privilege of keeping the French lyrics intact. *La Presse* came closest to acknowledging the differences between the English and the French lyrics with this summation: "*La version française de l'hymne national demeure inchangée. Les paroles d'Adolphe-Basile Routhier pour lesquelles Calixa Lavallée a composé une musique ne font aucune mention des fils ou des filles du*

pays." In English, it says, "The French version of the national anthem remains unchanged. The lyrics of Adolphe-Basile Routhier, for which Calixa Lavallee wrote the music, make no mention of the sons or daughters of the country." It matters not that the French lyrics denote a Crusade and are implicitly exclusive to non-Catholics; all that matters is the gender neutrality of the lyrics. *Le Devoir* showed the most apathetic coverage of all. The first results for "*les paroles de l'Ô Canada*" ("the lyrics of 'O Canada'") in the newspaper's search engine include an article from 2000 about Vladimir Putin's initiative to restore the Soviet anthem in Russia; the third result leads to a very short descriptive article from last June by the Canadian Press entitled, "*Les paroles de l'Ô Canada seront changées.*" Many nationalist and sovereigntist Quebecers already regard "*Les Gens du pays*" by Gilles Vigneault as a kind of unofficial anthem, just as some Scots favour "The Flower of Scotland."

In most countries, anthems emerge organically and unofficially as expressions of patrio-

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tism, though a legislature might recognize them as official later on. For instance, the US Congress did not make “The Star-Spangled Banner” the official national anthem of the United States until 1931, before which “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” (ironically, set to the same melody as “God Save the Queen”) and “America the Beautiful” competed with it popular patriotic songs. “God Save the Queen” even today has never been officially proclaimed or legislated as the United Kingdom’s national or royal anthem. In the early and mid-20th century, “The Maple Leaf Forever” rivalled Weir’s “O Canada” as a patriotic song for English-speaking Canadians.

Parliament could cut the Gordian Knot simply by making Weir’s *second* verse of “O Canada” the official anthem.

O Canada!
Where pines and maples grow,
Great prairies spread and lordly rivers flow,
How dear to us thy broad domain,
From East to Western Sea;
Thou land of hope for all who toil!
Thou True North, strong and free!

After all, these lyrics include all Canadians, with the possible exception of lazy or apathetic Canadians who refuse to “toil” away in their work. However, Parliament might want to alter the fourth line to something like “from sea to sea” in order to include the Arctic Ocean. And it would have to change the adjective “lordly” to something else like “mighty,” because “lordly” derives from “lord,” which refers to a deity or male aristocratic ruler and could therefore be construed as offensive by privileging male deities or elites over everyone else. Adopting the second verse, with minor alterations, would obviate the inevitable need to make further official alterations to the first verse. The reference to conifers in the first line carries the added benefit of representing how the first verse of “O Canada” would become an “evergreen document” subject to any and all fluctuations in linguistic inclusivity. ✎

Notes