

Review of
A Nation Unaware:
The Canadian Economic Culture

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A Nation Unaware: The Canadian Economic Culture

Herschel Hardin

J.J. Douglas Ltd., Vancouver, and David & Charles, North
Pomfret, Vermont, 1974, v + 378 pp., references, \$10.95.

Reviewed by Harry Swain

A problem for governments in all parts of the world is inculcating a sense of national loyalty in peoples thrown together by the caprices of history, war and politics. Searching for the elusive essence of Canadian identity is a popular national pastime north of the border, where the desire to demonstrate a distinctness from the behemoth on the doorstep weaves through all the nation's history. For the first time, Anglophone Canadians in this decade seem ready to accomodate sympathetically the aspirations of their French-speaking compatriots within a revitalized Confederation. The Canadian majority can do this only now, because only in recent years has its sense of itself become sufficiently sure: but it may be too late. The alienation of the vibrant best of Québec is now virtually complete.

Herschel Hardin, a Vancouver writer and broadcaster, has contributed an interesting and neglected theme to the argument about the dimensions of Canadian distinctiveness. The

vast preponderance of writing on the subject concentrates on history, the physical environment, and achievements in high culture and the arts. Hardin argues that a lot of this is beside the point, that a more important and inescapable part of any culture is its economic system, and that Canada and the United States have developed very differently in that sphere -- unknowingly, and with a minimum of public notice or comment. Despite the importation of an inappropriate ideology of competition and free enterprise, Hardin argues, Canadians have pioneered in the development of a unique "public enterprise culture." Beginning in mixed form with the railways, continuing through the unexpected successes of the radical innovations in publicly-owned Ontario Hydro (stimulus and exemplar to the later advocates of the TVA) and public broadcasting, and culminating in the remarkable efflorescence of experimental, pragmatic public enterprises during World War II, Hardin argues that Canada has reached the last quarter of the century with a distinctly different approach to management: the Crown monopoly corporation. The successes of the many variants of this form of economic organization are recounted through numerous examples and contrasted with the frailties of competitive private capitalism. Hardin sees the lesson being lost, though, in a sea of chamber-of-commerce ideology imported from the United States; his counterexamples of government subsidies to

foreign-owned private corporations give urgency to the narrative.

A minor argument, developed in a chapter which is little more than a footnote, claims uniqueness for the scale and nature of Canadian interregional transfer payments, which Hardin calls the "redistribution culture." It is too bad that this particular argument is not more fully developed, since it is quite probable that no nation on earth spends so much, per capita, on deliberate spatial redistribution.

The strengths of the book lie in the originality of the argument and the wealth of intriguing and frequently little-known evidence adduced in support. Political and economic geographers, particularly those with an abiding interest in Canada, will find it worthwhile reading. Flaws appear on several levels, though. There is a breathless, onrushing quality to much of Hardin's prose that occasionally substitutes for close reasoning. Canada's public enterprise culture may well be unique in North America, but some useful parallels might have been drawn with developments in Britain. Appreciation of the depth and seriousness of the gulf between Québec and Anglophone Canada, now so deep that many québécois now no longer rail at the barricades because that battle is *over* and it's time to go on to others, finds no place in a book about Canadian national culture. But where some themes

are slighted, others are repeated again and again. *A Nation Unaware* could have benefitted from a strong editorial hand: it would be twice the book at half the length.

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