

WHO ARE WE

A CITIZEN'S MANIFESTO

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS

*"An eloquent and hard-headed argument for reinventing
a shared vision of what it means to be Canadian."*

MARGARET WENTE
author of *The Accidental Canadian*

| INTRODUCTION

ALONG with many Canadians in their thirties, my political coming of age did not coincide with the tumultuous 1988 free-trade election, the failures of the Meech Lake or Charlottetown accords or the fall of the Berlin Wall. These events, momentous as they were, seemed driven by the politics and personalities of my parents' era. The crisis that shook me out of the comfortable "What, me worry?" complacency of adolescence and taught my generation an object lesson in why politics matter was the 1995 Quebec referendum.

The nail-biting drama that unfolded on television screens across the country on that late October evening and the emotional living-room debates that accompanied it seared into my consciousness the precariousness of this project we call Canada. Despite the history we might share or the values we might believe unite us as Canadians, during those anxiety-filled hours the country's continuing existence was measured in mere fractions of a percentage point—a surreal, if not sad, calculation of the sum of our nationhood.

In the aftermath of the referendum and in light of the razor-thin victory eked out by the "No" side, two friends and I decided to do something. To bottle up and ignore the passion that had

filled and fuelled the weeks leading up to the final vote seemed to us a capitulation to the very phenomenon that had landed the country in such a mess in the first place, namely our indifference to the common history, enduring values and civic traditions that bind Canadians together, French and English, Aboriginal and immigrant.

Without a scintilla of experience or two sous to rub together, Michael Chong, Erik Penz and I, all in our mid-twenties and freshly out of university, set about the work of launching the Dominion Institute. Our goal was to create an organization that would show Canadians that the country's continued existence should not be presented primarily as an economic proposition or necessity, as so many business and political leaders had argued in the run-up to the referendum. Rather, the Institute would advance the idea that the foundations of our unity should rest, first and foremost, on a deep appreciation and knowledge of the country's past, its enduring civic traditions and the struggles of previous generations to forge an inspiring civic identity capable of bridging our ethnic, regional and linguistic differences in common purpose.

This lofty vision survived to see the light of day thanks to the financial and moral support that followed the official launch of the Institute on Canada Day 1997, when we released the first of many polls that revealed how little Canadians know about their country's history. Our initial splash in the media and a two-year grant from the Donner Canadian Foundation saw the Institute through a challenging start-up period of missed payrolls, bounced rent cheques and a professional staff of only two, myself included. But sure enough, our message about the importance of Canadian history and shared citizenship to the country's future won adherents, and the "DI" became a going concern.

Leading the Institute was an exercise in guerrilla-style public advocacy. We put Louis Riel on trial on the CBC and drew three-

quarters of a million viewers in Quebec and English Canada and a raft of Métis protesters. We launched a veterans' speakers' bureau that has helped some 3,000 servicemen and women share their life experiences with upwards of a million school children. We used the media shamelessly (for a decade, the Institute generated, on average, a news story a day) to get our message out. We published books, produced television documentaries and text messaging campaigns, invested in feature films and commissioned a steady stream of public opinion polls. By the time I stepped down as full-time executive director in 2008, we had raised close to \$20 million in support of our mandate, employed dozens of committed young people and created a network of 3,700 volunteers who continue to champion the cause of civic literacy in schools and local communities nationwide.

In short, the Institute succeeded beyond our wildest expectations. It redeemed our faith in the relevance of Canada's past and civic traditions to the country's future and restored our conviction that the ties that bind us together are stronger than the forces that would pull us apart.

Our sense of accomplishment aside, when I finally handed over the reins of the Institute I could not help feeling that I was leaving a job half finished. I felt this way because during my final years at the Institute we found ourselves coming up more and more frequently against a view of the country's nature and purpose that was very different from the pan-Canadian philosophy we espoused.

Whether it was our advocacy for more and better history and civics education in the schools or our belief in the centrality of Canada's bicultural foundations to present-day debates about the country's values and institutions, our detractors—within government, academia and some media—took issue with our most basic premises. These critics, many of whom held positions of influence

and power, openly questioned the merits of maintaining, let alone nurturing, a strong national identity based on shared institutions, deeply felt social obligations and widely held civic values.

At conferences, in books and op-ed pieces and through their own advocacy groups, our antagonists contended that Canada had entered a new phase in its development, a period in which the multiple loyalties and strong regional identities that have always been constants in Canada—French vs. English, Central Canada vs. the West and Atlantic Canada, for example—were being accentuated by the effects of globalization, within and beyond our borders. As a result, the work of the Institute and similar groups to promote a common Canadian identity supposedly risked unsettling the uneasy peace between the country's regions, its historic minority groups and its national government and institutions. According to this line of reasoning, the Institute's efforts to assert a common civic creed in our schools and popular culture also threaten the fuzzy and indeterminate nature of what it means to be Canadian today, the much-vaunted national trait that allegedly allows us to thrive as a country comprised of disparate regions, peoples and groups who embrace a myriad of allegiances, ancestries and far-flung homelands. These are not just the views of an academic fringe. One in three Canadians surveyed by the Institute in a nationwide poll in 2007 stated that part of what makes Canada a successful society is "the *lack* of a strong national identity that individuals and groups are expected to adopt."

This view, repeated over and over on issue after issue, convinced me that although we like to joke that the only thing Canadians can agree on is that we are "not Americans," growing numbers of our fellow citizens have embraced concepts and purposes for the country that are fundamentally different from the long-held assumptions of previous generations—assumptions that our forebears thought were essential to how and why Canada works.

These notions and the lesson of the 1995 referendum—a reminder of how tenuous our loyalties to each other as Canadians can become if the enduring beliefs and principles we share as a people are not forcefully posited and promulgated—compelled me to put pen to paper and write this book.

I wanted to take on the now commonplace assertion that Canada is, and has always been, a nation shaped by regions and comprised of ethnic and linguistic groups who define themselves as different and who wish to remain so. This was not what I felt when I travelled the country for the Institute and worked with people and organizations who believe ardently in the relevance of the institutions, symbols and memory of a common nationhood. The notion that each of us is a concoction of “multiple identities” and that whatever collective vision we have for our country should be conditioned by this fact seemed to me out of step with Canadians’ desire to be part of a shared civic enterprise, an enterprise that has roots stretching back more than four centuries and that encompasses, at this moment in our history, everything from our efforts to bring stability to war-ravaged Afghanistan to our experiment with the world’s highest levels of legal per capita immigration to battling the effects of climate change across a national land mass second only to Russia’s.

I believe that the view that Canadians are, and always have been, a people defined by the multiplicity of their loyalties is based on a highly self-serving and comparatively recent reinterpretation of our history. As this book asserts, well before the patriation of the Constitution and the advent of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canadians already had a clear understanding about who we were as a people and what we had set out to accomplish together. Our founding principles and core beliefs gelled during two great imaginings of Canada. The first of these occurred in the decade that followed the failed rebellions in Upper and Lower

Canada, between 1838 and 1848. In the face of deep sectarian divisions that regularly boiled over into mayhem and murder, and opposed by colonial governments prepared to use the full power of the state to quash any challenge to their authority, French and English reformers banded together to create the civic institutions and values that made democratic self-government in Canada a reality. This singular accomplishment, achieved during a period of great social and economic tumult, forged an enduring consensus as to whom Canadians should be loyal to and why.

Canada's second great imagining of itself occurred not at Confederation, Vimy Ridge or Expo 67, but at the mid-mark of the twentieth century. United by the experience of fighting and winning the Second World War, and led by a remarkable group of politicians and civil servants, Canadians in the 1950s returned to the principled nation building their forebears had initiated a century earlier. Just as in the late 1840s and the 1850s, our institutions and national symbols were renewed and rethought to reflect Canadians' commitment to a common civic enterprise that was neither British nor American, but something uniquely our own.

The core tenet that links these two remarkable decades, a century apart, is our forebears' belief that, above all else, Canadians must remain loyal to themselves—that our highest duty as a people is to build institutions and inculcate values that unite us around a shared vision for our society, one that reflects the historical and social realities of our nation, Canada. Elucidating the principles and beliefs that arose during these two seminal periods and resisting the country's current slide into an ornery amalgam of regional statelets and grievance-riven minorities is the pressing issue of our time and the intent of this book.

It's the pressing issue facing us today because, according to a host of indicators, Canada's relative isolation from the churn of global events is fast coming to an end. Whether it is dealing with

the planet-wide causes and effects of climate change or the ticking demographic time bomb that threatens the social and financial well-being of our population, it is a matter of when, not if, we will be ejected from our comfy redoubt atop North America to face a new set of challenges to our collective way of life.

Once Canada is well and properly ensnared by one of these existential threats, the country will necessarily face the kind of test that our forebears confronted in the 1840s and in the middle of the last century and that we almost failed on that late October evening in 1995.

The question we have to ask ourselves is whether we have the requisite levels of social solidarity to endure a prolonged national crisis that severely strains the country's institutions and our loyalty to each other. Is there enough trust and shared knowledge among Canadians today to maintain the kind of broad social consensus that experience tells us is essential to coping with the major challenges the country could face in its near future?

It is my contention that in the next decade or two Canadians will have to rely as never before in our recent history on reserves of cultural capital—the common institutions, symbols, values and beliefs that define our shared nationhood—that were created and husbanded by past generations. We will have to rediscover, and quickly, what we have in common rather than fixating on our differences and hiving ourselves off from each other on the basis of language, region and ethnicity. In effect, we must return to an older and more substantive national conversation about what it means to be Canadian, a conversation in which we reimagine for our own time, in clear and precise terms, who we are.

Anticipating what this third great imagining of Canada could embrace is the thread that runs through this book. And on that score I am optimistic about our prospects. There are too many parallels between the challenges facing Canada today and the issues

and debates that stimulated the country's earlier great imaginings to deny that our past can be the guide to our future. Figuring out how to reawaken Canadians' sense of civic duty or make our national institutions and symbols relevant to young people or use our shared citizenship to give newcomers and the long-settled a sense of common purpose—these are all questions that our forebears wrestled with and worked through as they imagined and reimagined their country.

Rediscovering this treasure trove of insights into how and why the country works is more than just an intellectual exercise for historians and policy wonks. We have a responsibility beyond doing right by the generations of Canadians who propelled our country from colony to nation-state. Our collective task is to ensure that the ambitious civic project our society set for itself more than a century and a half ago—to reconcile our differences in a single and compelling vision of Canadian nationhood—continues, whatever an increasingly uncertain world throws our way.

In this spirit, and with this objective in mind, let's begin.