The Myth of the Undefended Border in the Contemporary Canada

It is physically invisible, geographically illogical, militarily indefensible, and emotionally inescapable\(^1\).

Hugh Keenleyside, 1929

Both Canada and the United States share the North America. The border between them is usually called 49th parallel, although only \(\frac{1}{4}\) of it runs along this parallel. It is the world’s longest land boundary between two countries – 8891 kilometers long. In my presentation I would like to show some aspects of an influence of the myth which is connected with the border between Canada and the U.S. The myth exists in contemporary Canada, which is especially visible after September 11\(^{th}\). The idea of creating common external boundary with the United States, the so called North American Perimeter, has reminded Canadians how important is the role of all border issues.

Contemporary Canada and the United States are generally firm friends. Politicians and journalists have been fond of talking about “the undefended border”. Canadians and Americans have grown up listening to that cliché taken from the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s speech. He has said once “That long frontier from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, guarded only by neighborly respect and honorable obligations, is an example to every country and a pattern for the future of the world”\(^2\). It looks like this situation is rooted deeply in the past. But it is a misunderstanding, according to Canadian historian C.P. Stacey, “for the thing that makes that relationship interesting and significant for the world today is the fact that it evolved slowly and painfully from a very different state of things”\(^3\).

Meaning of the border

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In the 21st century, for both Canada and the United States, the traditional and historic concept of the border has lost its relevance. Thanks to the revolution in information, multinational companies and media, ordinary people cross the border easily. The border does not matter for them – it is transparent. Thus, I would like to make distinction between historic and contemporary meaning of the Canadian-American border.

In the past Canadians perceived the boundary as a military threat. It must be kept in mind that separation from powerful neighbor in the south has been a central and existential question for this country from the 18th thru 19th century. The obvious examples of the threat are the American Revolution and the War of 1812-14. Next, during the 1860s, border raids from Irish-American partisans contributed to the birth of the Dominion of Canada, which could be more readily defended. Fear of American invasion remained a political and military constant in Canada until the beginning of the 20th century.

In the second half of this century the border has evolved beyond bricks, mortar and pavement. The myth of the undefended border started to be connected more with Canadian cultural and economic dependency on the U.S. As Paul C. Newman wrote in Maclean’s: “Maintaining an effective border between us remains essential to Canada's survival. (...) Our border has defined us. It has been the symbolic barrier that created us as a people, separating us from the compatible but far from identical society to our south.”

Thus, Canadian Prime Ministers after the IIWW tried to keep cultural and economic border. For example when John Diefenbaker became the Prime Minister in 1957, he attempted to switch Canada’s trade from the U.S. to Great Britain. And Pierre E. Trudeau after 1980 managed to create nationalistic oil policies and strengthen efforts to control foreign investments.

But all the efforts failed when the next conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney came to power in 1984. One of his main priorities was to restore good relations with the southern neighbor. He dismantled the National Energy Program and the Foreign Investment Review Agency, changed its name to Investment Canada. The most important was the Free Trade Agreement with the United States signed in 1988.

At the beginning of 21st century the border still has a cultural dimension, but Canadians begin changing. Douglas Coupland in his new book Souvenir of Canada wrote “sometime in the 1990s, Canada rapidly became different from the United States.” Then he continues “Oddly, Canada’s process of differentiation is occurring just when it theoretically

4 P. C. Newman, op. cit.
ought not be happening: our country is being hosed over by free trade agreements, it’s being inundated by American media from every conceivable outlet (…)\textsuperscript{6}.

Canadians may now talk about lifting the boundary and they have started a debate about a future of Canada’s sovereignty. The convergence of three factors has intensified the debate in Canada:

1. the dramatically increasing integration of both economies,
2. the effects of September 11\textsuperscript{th},
3. the idea of creation of a common external boundary.

The most important question in the discussion is whether Canada should follow the European Union: open the border and check if it helps enriching its culture. Or should not change anything; just defend Canadian identity from behind the wall.

**The impact of September 11th on the border**

After terrorist attacks the U.S. tried to transform the frontier into a security fence\textsuperscript{7}. One of the first measures taken by American government was to seal the border. Canadian border security was initially blamed for allowing the hijackers to enter the United States. Later American government informed that it was a mistake and the terrorists entered the U.S. from various foreign destinations. But as a result of those steps, two days after the attacks, the line-up of cars on the Detroit –Windsor’s checkpoint was 36 kilometers long. The longest undefended border in the world turned out to be a real barrier for about 550 million people crossing the border each year and $475 billion of trade\textsuperscript{8}. And if you consider that nine out of ten Canadians live within 160 kilometers of the border and nearly 90% of Canada's export goes to the USA, Canada could not ignore the problem and the undefended border again became the hottest topic. I was not surprised while reading the *Toronto Star* I came across a question if after the recent war on Iraq, Canadians would need a passport to enter the U.S.\textsuperscript{9}.

Until Sept. 11\textsuperscript{th}, the border was guarded by just 334 border patrol agents and 498 immigration inspectors. Twice as short American border with Mexico is protected by 9,000

\textsuperscript{6} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{7} M. Kergin, *op. cit.*
border patrol agents and 1,300 immigration inspectors\textsuperscript{10}. But after terrorist attacks Washington announced the deployment of 400 National Guard troops, Customs and the Immigration and Naturalization Service officers\textsuperscript{11}. This measure was taken by Canada as a strong suggestion. As soon as possible (in December, 2001) Canada signed with the U.S the so called the \textit{Smart Border Accord}. It was prepared to improve security and to avoid future terrorist attacks. The 30-point accord included increase in staffing and use of new technologies (such technical innovations as biometric registration of personal traits and a systematic exchange of information to screen vehicles and people)\textsuperscript{12}.

The next step was the so-called \textit{Perimeter Project}. It is an idea of creation of a common external boundary for the North America. The agreement assumes establishing a strong border control authorities across the continent. But this is only the first step. The American government emphasized that “it must be followed by a long series of other initiatives in all aspects of security, including immigration and refugee policy”\textsuperscript{13}. It will also cover policing, security and customs procedures.

The new policy concerning the common border has revived Canada's oldest existential problem: keeping itself separate from the United States. Canadian elite found themselves under pressure from Washington and it appeared that common rules would threaten Canadian sovereignty. The fact that the Canadians have a greater stake in maintaining the easy flow of commerce across the border makes the situation between the two countries even more complicated. Commentators worry that the U.S. will define for example the limits of the Canadian immigration policy. Frequently newspapers’ editors write that Canadians should not have any illusions that their country’s sovereignty matters much for the Americans.

Such anxieties are not unique to Canada – they are a mark of our times. Even in Poland before joining the EU we had a strong debate over the sovereignty. But according to Allan Rock, former Canadian Minister of Industry “Free flow of capital, talent and information rendering old style notions of sovereignty obsolete”\textsuperscript{14}.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibidem.
Is the boundary needed?

The Perimeter Project, the creation of a joint Canadian-American external boundary, is probably irreversible. The business elites favor consistent expansion of integration - including for example customs union. Polls show that 85 percent of Canadians support creation of a security perimeter and 81 favor introduction of common refugees and immigration policies\(^{15}\).

Following the President Vincente Fox’s proposal of opening the American-Mexican border sometime between 2020 and 2025\(^{16}\), the Canadians started wondering whether Canada and the United States needed a border at all. Tom D’Aquino, president of Canadian Chamber of Commerce, an institution representing 150 largest corporations said in January 2003 “What we are really talking about is totally reinventing the border. The border should no longer be seen as a demarcation line between Canada and the United States. It should simply be an internal checkpoint”\(^{17}\). And former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney encouraged for many years establishing “a European-style union between the two countries with free movement of goods, services and people”\(^{18}\).

Opponents emphasize that in return the Canadian government would be forced to abandon tools used previously to build and keep sovereignty. They said that some things were not compatible with invisible borders. They suggest, like Carol Goar, a columnist from the Toronto Star that “Borders have purposes that go far beyond regulating trade. They define where the home is. They allow a nation decide the laws and policies by which its citizens live. They give a people a territory within their values hold sway. They create a sense of community”\(^{19}\). Professor James Laxer of York University added that “sovereignty cannot be measured in simple dollars and cents”\(^{20}\).

The supporters of the idea of lifting the border suggest that Canada should draw inspiration from “the greatest political innovation in modern history, the European

\(^{20}\) A. Dawson, op. cit.
Community”\textsuperscript{21}. They say the EU can be perceived as a pattern for Canada, because European integration has never meant to get rid of the old nationality and identity. And when security policies are harmonized (which largely took place) the need for a physical border disappear. It will remain only signs at the side of the roads like in the large part of the European Union, that read, "You Are Now Entering Austria/France etc”.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The meaning of the old myth of the undefended border is changing in contemporary Canada. The odds are that Canadians are begining to understand that the opening of the boundary does not necessarily imply a loss of political and cultural autonomy. That the economic strength, which resulted from deeper integration with the U.S., could ease to make Canada’s own independent social, cultural and value choices. And if Canada follows Europe it will be the completion of this myth. The undefended border became only the frontier in people’s minds. Although considering recent events like: SARS, incident with mad cows in Alberta or well-known dislike between former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and George W. Bush, a different scenario is also possible. But no one really can imagine that the undefended border may again be built with bricks, mortar and pavement.

References