



The liberal north

As many Western countries turn to populism, Canadians will soon decide if they want to remain a liberal beacon, says Brooke Unger

THE PEACE ARCH at the border between the Canadian province of British Columbia and America's Washington state bears two inscriptions. Drivers heading south read that Canadians and Americans are "brethren dwelling together in unity". On the way back the message is that they are "children of a common mother". Built in 1921, the reinforced-concrete monument is said to be among the first earthquake-resistant structures in North America. It commemorates a century-old peace treaty between the United States and Britain, one of Canada's former colonial powers. But those feelings of brotherhood have long been evident between America and Canada itself—as neighbours, friends and allies who share the world's longest undefended border.

The current question facing Canadians is whether they can withstand the political earthquakes originating south of the border. Donald Trump, America's president since 2017, imposed tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminium, supposedly to protect national security. He called the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) "perhaps the worst trade deal ever made" and forced Canada and Mexico to renegotiate it. After a G7 summit in Quebec last year Mr Trump blasted Justin Trudeau, Canada's prime minister, as "very dishonest and weak". In May America's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, called Canada's claim to the Northwest Passage, which links the Arctic and Pacific oceans, "illegitimate", questioning the two governments' agreement to disagree on it.

Mr Trump has lashed out at many countries, but none is more stunned to be on the receiving end than Canada. The neighbours are, indeed, fraternal twins. Ninety per cent of Canadians live within 100 miles of the border. America buys 74% of Canada's exports of goods and provides 64% of its imports. It holds nearly half

the stock of foreign investment in Canada. Canadians winter in Florida. The country's sports teams compete in American leagues. This year the Toronto Raptors became the first Canadian team to win the National Basketball Association finals. In English-speaking Canada most of the top 30 television shows are American.

Yet, despite their shared roots and culture, the two countries have always been distinctive, and never more so than today. Just as the first rumbles of the Trump earthquake were being felt in America, in 2015 Canada, after ten years of rule by the Conservative Party, elected the Liberal Party, led by Mr Trudeau, a telegenic former snowboard instructor, who has set about implementing one of the most liberal social, economic and environmental agendas in the Western world. He promised to restore Canadian values that he said his Conservative predecessor, Stephen Harper, had abandoned. To Canadians who had feared that the country had "lost its compassionate and constructive voice in the world", the victorious Mr Trudeau proclaimed, "We're back."

Who wants more?

As Canada turned leftwards, much of the rest of the rich world was turning the other way. America elected Mr Trump. Britons voted for Brexit. European countries such as Poland and Hungary have moved to the populist right. Centrists have been punished: Angela Merkel for inviting in too many refugees, Emmanuel Macron for his climate-friendly policies. Vladimir Putin boasts that the liberal idea has "outlived its purpose". In December 2016, after Mr Trump's victory, Joe Biden, the outgoing American vice-president, told Mr Trudeau that the "world is going to spend a lot of time looking to you, Mr Prime Minister".

Mr Trudeau has tried to live up to that prophecy. His parliament legalised assisted suicide, and cannabis for recreational use. His government has let people identify themselves as neither male nor female on their passports. It has moved efforts to fight global warming from the periphery of policy to the centre, compelling provinces to put a price on carbon emissions or submit to a federal scheme. It has continued Mr Harper's policy of liberalising trade, but tilted leftwards by redistributing income and tolerating budget deficits. In a general election in October, Canadians will decide whether they want four more years of Mr Trudeau's liberal policies.

The prime minister has been a prominent figure internationally, too. Like his father, Pierre, who held the job in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, befriending Fidel Castro and recognising communist China before America did, he has been willing to stand apart from American foreign policy. While Mr Trump seeks to undermine international institutions and alliances, Canadian diplomats are striving to shore them up. As its neighbour to the south retreats into a more insular mindset, less willing to take on responsibilities in the world, Canada continues to push its liberal international agenda. It has taken a lead in defending the World Trade Organisation and co-chaired the Equal Rights Coalition that defends gay rights.

While Mr Trump has repelled refugees, Mr Trudeau has welcomed them, notably Syrians and gay people from Chechnya. The world has seen him defy political fashion for four years. With the election approaching, it will be watching "in order to determine whether doing the right thing ends up with the right results", says Bill Morneau, the finance minister.

Keeping up with the neighbours

2019 or latest

	Canada	United States
Population	37m	329m
GDP	\$2trn	\$21trn
Life expectancy	82 years	79 years
Share of foreign-born population, % of total	22%	14%
Gun homicides per 100,000 people	0.7	12
Happiness ranking (out of 156 countries)	9	19
Competitiveness ranking (out of 140 countries)	12	1
Trust in government, % of informed public	61%	33%
Maple syrup production, gallons	13m	4m

Sources: National statistics; United Nations; World Economic Forum; Edelman

