

Three things Canadians can do in a canoe...

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It was Pierre Trudeau, I believe, who first defined a Canadian as *someone who could make love in a canoe*.

As a wanna-be, soon-ta-be Canadian (New York to Vancouver, 1970), I must admit I was a *little puzzled*. What exactly did Trudeau mean by that remark? And what *were* the implications?

I already knew why I had chosen this country. First seeing it as a tourist, I was swept away by its beauty. When I started paying attention to what was being said, I realized Canada had the potential to achieve on a governance level that of which visionary American leaders such as Bobby Kennedy only dreamt: an enterprise-intervention model capable of delivering the best of the markets in the short term and, through good governance, the medium-term we collectively have a right to anticipate.

(The long term, like the cat, is named by no-one and is quite capable of looking after herself, thank you...)

'Tho only 24 at the time, my commitment to Canada — framed as it was in the most compelling (to me) of thoughts: “Canada is where I want to raise my children” — was prompt and absolute.

I returned to New York, jumped in my red TR4A *IRS* and headed west. Whereupon a masters in agricultural economics at UBC. Whereupon ten years in Ottawa. Whereupon my return to the West in 1983.

But back to the canoe...

A canoeist myself and ever the optimist, I ponder Trudeau's observation. It must be a compliment, I think to myself — a comment on the deftness, subtlety, skill and passion of Canadian lovers — and eagerly anticipate my new citizenship.

Some twenty-five years later, having acquired along the way the vintage canvas-and-wood Chestnut canoe which inhabits my lean-to abutting the shores of Bowen Island, reality tempers anticipation.

Over the past decade, those very national characteristics which served us so well in our canoe days — capability, creativity, cooperation — now seem held in low esteem as we find ourselves newly adrift upon a sea of economic supertankers fighting one another for way.

Get competitive! Integrate vertically! Collaborate horizontally! Seize scale economies! Specialize! Cut costs! Lower overheads! Plan strategically! Manage risk! Empower! Grow! Diversify!

Good imperatives all. Problem is, the supertankers, being supertankers, soon discover the arena is most efficiently divided (from their standpoint) amongst not more than two or three ships. More, and there's just too much pesky (read costly) competition for space. And so they proceed to chase the others off.

(Also known as “my rugged individualism ends where your anti-trust vacuum begins” — a/k/a Adam Smith falls off the page when federal competition policy, like a cop chasing a crook over the town line, runs up short against national boundaries which effectively constrain jurisdiction.)

Enter the Canadians.

(If we think, just for a moment, of this column as a play and us it's audience, we will now take a brief intermission to consider what exactly is happening here before we jettison the canoes...)

Just as it is recognized that a fleet of small boats paddling together are far more sustainable to a cove than are several large supertankers, so too is it becoming recognized that a food policy based on sustaining B.C.'s many highly diversified and independent farmers will result in greater and far more sustainable benefits to the community and the environment than does a policy which allows (as does the U.S. model, for example) two transitional giants to control chicken production for 300 million people.

And consumers are getting this message.

Just as any sailor knows that to explore a fjord, you want a light and maneuverable craft, so too are farmers realizing that they are far more able to explore and respond to niche markets than are their overgrown trade competitors. And that its more fun to chase high-valued markets upwards than to run down-market in pursuit of cheaper and cheaper imports.

And consumers (who love BST-free milk, ICM crops, etc.) are getting this message.

What does it take to make love in a canoe?

Capability, creativity, cooperation — the three “C’s” which (I firmly believe as an economist) will remain the key to navigating the new “high seas” of global markets.

Yes, farmer cooperatives are going to have to smarten up, streamline operations and perhaps restructure/rethink the way they do business (perhaps drawing strength from their collective enhancement of member competitiveness rather than the right to market product). Yes, a whole host of other things also need to be done.

But understanding, sustaining and enhancing the benefits of an independent farm community is critical if farmers are to proceed with any dignity and profitability into the next decade.

And if no one in this province gives two figs about the sustaining the dignity and profitability of B.C.'s farmers, would they please be kind enough to let us know now so that we can make some plans for the future?

(Wouldn't it be a pity if the ability of Canadians to keep the canoe aright whilst making love had less to do with our passion than with our indifference; a national reluctance to “rock the boat?”)

This will (read should) be another interesting election...