

Canada-US Relations - Lessons from *Life with Uncle*

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This is a difficult and uncertain time for Canada in its relations with the United States. We face an administration in the US whose values seem particularly divergent from those of Canada. Canada has departed from American leadership on a basic strategic initiative—the invasion of Iraq. And could do so again on another—ballistic missile defence. Faced with terrorist activity in North America and the challenges of defence against it, which include the flow of people and goods across the border, we are urged by many to re-visit our relations with the US in their entirety.

I have always been impressed by the work of John Holmes, a leading observer of Canada-US relations. And to clarify my own perspective in undertaking a research project to explore the future of Canada in North America it is sensible to examine Holmes' classic on the topic, *Life with Uncle: the Canadian-American Relationship*, written in 1981. It is the culmination of a career in, and thinking about, Canadian foreign policy. This stylish distillation of his thoughts is short at 144 pages and pithy.

Holmes lived from 1910 to 1988. He joined what was known as External Affairs at age 33, held a number of positions abroad, and rose to the level of Assistant Deputy Minister. He left External at age 50 and became President of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs. In subsequent years he was a professor at the University of Toronto and York University and continued a life-long involvement with the Institute where he was a much respected and loved figure, a kind of sage in residence. He was awarded 11 honorary doctorates. And there is now a John Holmes Memorial Lecture at York University's Glendon College.

In *Life with Uncle* Holmes says it's his "intention to grope for a few enduring principles". What are his reflections on, and prescriptions for, Canadian-American relations?

For Holmes, the US has a "compulsion to play God" and should "climb off its godlike perch". Phrases with particular significance as they come respectively from the book's first and last pages. Given the current US administration's actions in Iraq his comments seem particularly relevant. America sees itself not as an ordinary country but as a beacon and "model". For Americans "right thinking people would recognize US aims as their own". Not surprisingly, and poignantly,

he says the US needs urgently to learn how to be a better ally.

Holmes writes of President Reagan and Secretary Haig and says Canada should not be obliged to accept their view of the world. One has only to update by replacing Reagan with George W. Bush and Haig with Rumsfeld. And, as if speaking to us in current circumstances, Holmes writes: "I would certainly not rule out [for Canada] positions of loud non-conformity when there seems no honourable alternative and if we are sure of our ground, but let us not pretend that life with an angry uncle would be easy." As if to nail down the current relevance of this point, he adds "It would be considerably more comfortable [for Canada] to differ with the Americans in company with the Europeans, or at least some of them, on matters of grand strategy. In doing so [Canada] would not avoid Washington's wrath, but our offence would seem less rank."

While Holmes clearly does not preclude Canada from going off-side with the Americans he stresses that "things go better when the mood across the border is amiable" and that "good feeling is in the eternal interest of the unequal partner". When we do diverge from American leadership we should not cower: "US power is generally functional and on balance the US is constrained in using all of its power." Moreover, "the American government machine is not coherent with a coordinated policy toward Canada." Holmes, drawing on his experience, says the "US does not seriously intend explicit threats to Canada, but the weaker power Canada feels some implicit threat when it opposes the US."

Holmes would seem to be saying that the US is almost a benign force, and yet in an apparent contradiction he writes "Americans have never forsaken their aspiration for a united continent" that "Americans have nourished a mission of redemption for North America at large" and that the "very existence of Canada is hard for Americans to understand." For

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Holmes “continentalism is a force of nature that Canada tries to control and discipline and should never encourage.” Such a comment as an American “aspiration for a united continent” may seem extreme and to find its basis in ancient history. One can only conclude that at least in this instance ‘ancient history’ is for Holmes relevant history.

When Holmes was writing there was, and now almost 25 years later there continues to be, a notion that there is a solution to Canada-US relations. If only we could find it. Holmes argues that “Canadians seem to think there’s a solution and there is not.” As Holmes says “Coping with the fact of the USA is and always has been an essential ingredient of being Canadian.” “The beginning of wisdom is to live with them.” He writes that “The ruthless drive toward the most efficient organization of this continent is a mindless propulsion.” and that “Absolute positions of utter independence or total assimilation are illusions and spectres.”

Holmes writes of his “intention to grope for a few enduring principles” and these flow from his understanding of the conditions and characteristics of the Canadian-American relationship. Such as: “Canada-US inequality is so great that there is no safe basis for partnership” and he advocates mechanisms that have at their heart what he calls “the principle of jointness” which is found in temporary and continuing bodies such as the International Joint Commission where there are two commissions which while they work together “recommend to two governments whose sovereign right to decide is not questioned”. NAFTA, with its integrative effects, perhaps goes beyond the principles Holmes identifies as animating the IJC.

Canada, Holmes advises, “should not be tempted by arrangements going beyond the joint principle.” For Holmes the “Canada-US relationship should be based on process and habit rather than on supranational institutions.” “Effective patterns of pragmatic and functional contacts” he says “enable Canada to secure arrangements that could never be negotiated at a higher level and that this kind of cooperation relieves pressure for more formal bodies.”

“We should never put ourselves in a position where the Americans do not treat us as foreigners” says Holmes. He favours “arrangements that facilitate cooperation with fences.” To slip into “regarding ourselves as an associated North American state would lead only to frustration, impotence, and confused and angry arguments about loyalty.” Holmes cautions against “schemes which prescribe a North American entity.” “The eagle may soar; beavers build dams” he advises.

According to Holmes, “Canadians need a calmer assumption that Canada is here to stay” as part of a necessary and unending process of “unagonizing reappraisals and reconsiderations” of our ongoing relationship. It seems he is saying “get a grip”. “Strength and weakness are facts of life” we should realize we are dealing with a “clash of legitimate interests” and drop the “peevish tone that leaves the impression we seek indulgences.” “Americans on the whole, and with justification, do not feel they mistreat Canada.” And yet as Holmes also says “It is a challenge for Canada to live beside a huge power, which sees itself has having that power by divine right.” “Canada in the face of the US to keep its faith requires steady nerves, mature patience, and a firm grasp of principles.” In the recent controversy concerning joining the Americans in Iraq, Canada would seem to have followed such a path as well as taken a final lesson which is that “America needs Canada to be not submissive but stubborn, opinionated, tiresome and, of course, always a wise friend.”

In *Life with Uncle*, as in his larger oeuvre, Holmes sees multifaceted complexity, absolutes are anathema. He is a moderate who counsels restraint. What one might describe as contradictions in Holmes’ views he would, more accurately, describe as paradox. He is a liberal internationalist who has no romantic illusions about the US and in that sense is a realist. While wary of the US he is ultimately happy for its global leadership, agreeing with and sharing most of its ends if not always its means.

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