

# SKATING ON THIN ICE: HOCKEY AND THE CANADIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Canadians know in their hearts they have long led the world when it comes to shooting pucks into the net. This belief has played a large role in keeping many different people together across a great, expansive territory that includes numerous, often divisive political, social, and economic cleavages. If hockey is part of Canada's national identity, how did this come to be and what will challenge this understanding in the future? Given the media, technology, and the opportunism of political leaders, hockey has been partially constructed and strategically placed as part of the Canadian national identity. Further, contemporary forces, including demographic change, globalization and the rise of other sports, such as soccer, challenge the future importance of hockey to Canada.

A nation is a vague yet important concept in society. Commitment to a nation for individuals can be above their family, peers, professional associations, communities, and province or state and regional attachments. Commitment to a nation for individuals, also can be equal to, above or below their identification with a country. The nation is consequently a powerful political identity to many people and as such, can be unifying and divisive, benevolent or benign. It is a collective personal identification with a political community larger than oneself. This association is discriminating. Nations distinguish groups of people from others. Nations are thought to emerge organically and over time based on history of efforts, perseverance and devotion, sacrifices and claims, defeats and triumphs.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, nations have some identifying characteristics. These current components help define the nation to its contemporary subscribers and distinguish it from other such collectivities. Political scientists and other observers have attempted to identify the common nation credentials, some of which are visible and others present, but invisible. Race, language, physical characteristics, and geography (as in, where you live) are cited as nation factors that can be more easily grasped and identified than other

aspects less tangible, including common culture, shared values and dreams, a feeling of comfort and solidarity and also shared understandings and interpretations of the past with heroes, villains, and myths.<sup>2</sup>

Such visible and invisible parts of what makes a nation are objective and subjective, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson thus referred to nations as "imagined communities," not that they are illusions, but simply not so quantifiable.<sup>4</sup> A nation is like a "living soul," spiritual more than being Petri dish testable and scientific. At any rate, the sum total of the ingredients of any given nation is a national identity.<sup>5</sup>

The flexibility of what can be included in a national identity permits the inclusion of activities engaged in and watched by participants of a nation, including sports. Sport, in general, helps create and reproduce national identities.<sup>6</sup> Such cultural activities breed connections with others in a given nation.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, hockey can be included as part of Canada's national identity. Hockey is "Canada's game" and its "national passion."<sup>8</sup> Canadians can well imagine they were born holding a hockey stick, slap shot ready.

Apart from hockey, Canada struggled and struggles to nail down its other national identity elements. It took forty years to agree on a national flag, and Canada had no officially sanctioned national anthem (to sing at hockey games) until 1980! Consequently, the characteristics of a Canadian national identity are as much fault lines as bedrock.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, hockey became the Krazy Glue of Canada's otherwise underdeveloped and shaky national identity. For Canada, as a nation, these national identity parts include its gradually achieved sovereignty, northern geographic reality, lukewarm French-English relations and regionalism and anti-American sentiment.

Canada made full statehood only after decades of peaceful discussion and the patriation of the Constitu-

tion in 1982. Lacking flashpoints like revolutions and civil wars, Canada never faced obvious oppression and always had some freedoms and rights guaranteed by the British monarchy. Empire, not revolution, created Canada. "It is the product of treaty and statute, the dry legal instruments of the diplomat and the legislator," lectured historian W.L. Morton.<sup>10</sup> Such described bland beginnings meant no one Canadian way of life emerged. The peaceful and slow process of Canada's political maturity inhibited the development of a shared national self-awareness for Canadians that would solidify common values, rationalize the set-up of its democratic institutions and bring together its disparate social and population elements.<sup>11</sup> Canada's gradual process of becoming a full-fledged state robbed it of a swashbuckling, binding historical narrative with universal national protagonists.<sup>12</sup> Hockey, filling the void, provided national, homegrown heroes that Canada's political evolution lacked. The Stanley Cup became more than a trophy; it was a national icon and a passionate representation of victory.<sup>13</sup> Further, Canada was seen to set the standard for the world in hockey performance. Other countries gauged their hockey abilities in relation to Canada's. Canada was recognized and respected internationally for its puck handling ability when it was gradually seeking full sovereignty from its colonial past.<sup>14</sup>

Another aspect of the Canadian national identity is said to be its northern geography and accompanying chilly winters.<sup>15</sup> Canadians, presumably stereotypically, wear gloves, scarves and toques. The need for such garments collectively unites them. In the words of writer Margaret Atwood, Canadian winters create a country with an enduring theme of survival.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, hockey, a winter sport, is a representation and celebration (more like a triumph) over Canada's northern geography.<sup>17</sup>

French-English relations represent an additional national identity element less inspirational given two near-miss separation attempts by the province of Quebec. Canada, as a country of "two solitudes," has a weak sense of national self-understanding between its French and English populations.<sup>18</sup> Hockey has brought French and English Canadians together. "There was probably no other common interest [besides hockey] that brought the two solitudes together... into the same kind of regular and passionate engagement with one another," notes Whitson.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, regional identifications by Canadians that can equal or surpass the intensity of national ties make up part of Canada's national identity. These identifications are often articulated as rivalries and grievances against other regions.<sup>20</sup> Western alienation, for instance, is the perception the Western provinces are not equal partners in Confederation. Such feelings are expressed every time the public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), runs "YET ANOTHER" Toronto Maple Leafs game when the Vancouver Canucks are also playing. Here, hockey is again mixed into the understanding of who Canadians are and how they relate to each other.

Philosopher George Grant felt to be genuinely Canadian, a person must be anti-American.<sup>21</sup> So, much rumi-

nation about Canada hinges on examining how and why Canadians are different from Americans.<sup>22</sup> Such anti-American sentiment is rooted in fears of cultural and economic assimilation yet hockey remains largely Canadian in North America. That hockey has thrived in Canada despite much American indifference is a distinguishing factor setting out differences between the residents of both countries.<sup>23</sup> Hockey's superstars may be largely anonymous throughout the United States and National Hockey League games may be aired on obscure specialty channels.<sup>24</sup> A playoff game shown on American television, in overtime, may abruptly switch to an infomercial before its resolution.<sup>25</sup> Yet to Canadians, this lack of American interest in hockey is even necessary. Hockey is a clear expression to all Canadians of how their national identity, at least in terms of culture and sports, is separate from the character of Americans.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, hockey has helped promote and is part of Canada's national identity. Hockey may be credited with bringing Canadians from different parts of the country together despite its other weak national identity connections. Not the soapbox, Parliament, or a battlefield but the hockey rink is "the place where the monumental themes of Canadian life are played out – English and French, East and West, Canada the U.S..." write Ken Dryden and Roy MacGregor.<sup>27</sup> Hockey is a "collective representation" about what being Canadian is.<sup>28</sup> However, this assumed natural fit has been somewhat constructed by media and technology, and fabricated by elected representatives who continue to use the game to promote national-building objectives. National identities change. In this respect, immigration, globalization and other sports such as soccer will challenge the strength of hockey as Canadian.

"The myth of hockey as 'our game' persists, in part, because there remain the national media with a vested interest in maintaining that myth," writes Sean Hayes.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, media and technology have helped place hockey in Canada's national identity. "Hockey Night in Canada" was the first program to reach a national audience.<sup>30</sup> Then brought into living rooms, it was this television show in concert with the game itself that united Canadians.<sup>31</sup> Technological improvements including instant replays and color television further increased the appeal and established home hockey viewing as a habit; by the mid-1960s, NHL hockey was the most popular television programming in Canada. Hockey was not fully "Canada's game" until communication technology made its collective screening possible.<sup>32</sup> Since then, "Hockey Night in Canada" promotes itself as uniquely Canadian and its annual "Hockey Day in Canada" event is more than a Canadian team jamboree but portrayed as a representation of what Canada is all about.

Ann Hall and Trevor Slack suggest, "sport is a readily available source of political capital that can be used to build a national identity..."<sup>34</sup> States habitually use sport for many political purposes including establishing nationhood, identities for citizens, bridging diversity of people and their backgrounds and cultures, and to display

power and status to the world.<sup>35</sup> Elected representatives of their day held up early and successful Canadian athletes including runner Tom Longboat and the rower, Ned Hanlan, as examples of Canadian international strength.<sup>36</sup> During the Cold War, government, through the Canadian Sports Advisory Council, stated sport is important for defense and the national economy.<sup>37</sup> Prime Minister Trudeau, who dropped a puck for the ceremonial face-off at one of the 1972 Canada-Russia series games, linked national unity efforts with culture in terms of the arts, television, publishing and sports.<sup>38</sup> In the 1970s, the Proposed Sports Policy for Canadians included a section on national unity.<sup>39</sup> Sports achievements, too, came to be seen as a solution to concerns of American cultural domination in Canada.<sup>40</sup>

Political leaders regularly, opportunistically, invoke and connect themselves to hockey and its heroes (Prime Minister Chrétien requesting Jean Beliveau accept an appointment to the Senate, for instance, or the current prime minister supporting a sequel to the 1972 Series).<sup>41</sup> After all, hockey's large audience includes voters, most of whom do not find sport, unlike the other national identity features, to be divisive.<sup>42</sup> Hockey rises above these cleavages; it is frequently exploited by political leaders and others to strengthen or side-step an otherwise weak national identity. In this sense, hockey's place in Canada's national identity rubric is in some respects commercially and politically contrived. Further, changes to Canada are bringing changes to hockey's national identity strength.

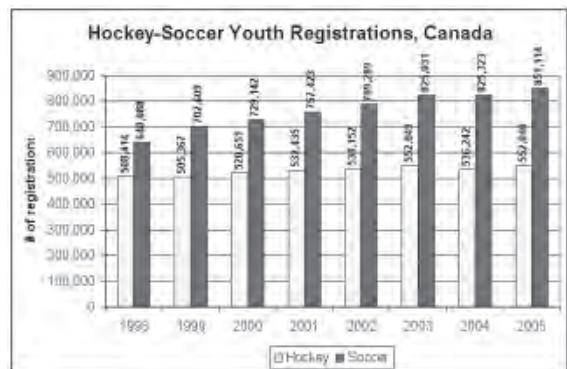
Canada has always been a land of immigrants and immigration has dramatically changed Canada over the past century. Immigrants made up thirteen percent of the Canadian population in 1901, and Canada welcomed 13.4 million people to its provinces and territories through to the end of the twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> By 2001, 18.4 percent of the Canadian population was born somewhere else.<sup>44</sup> Young, new Canadians through the Great Depression years to the 1970s learned to play and enjoy hockey as a means to "become Canadian," but hockey today no longer so monolithically represents the common experiences of these Canadians.<sup>45</sup> Statistics Canada, for example, has found participation in groups or organizations such as sports teams is less common today among first generation immigrants.<sup>46</sup> An increasing number of immigrants (by 1996, 27 percent from Asia and 21 percent from places other than the United Kingdom or Europe) are from countries where hockey has scant presence.<sup>47</sup> Such immigrants, as they always have, are taking time to adjust to their new home, communities, and their jobs. Changing demographics may in turn affect Canada's status as a hockey nation.

Global migration, global economic activity and free trade, and global communications are recasting national identities, providing more commercial entertainment and fragmenting audiences.<sup>48</sup> It is more difficult for states to remain insular, nurturing, and protective of customary activities including sports, since these sports now compete

against many entertainment and cultural options. In this way, it is well known the N.H.L. has long been a multinational and commercialized endeavour, with more than just Canadians winning face offs, and with U.S. teams in cities with little hockey history. Soccer represents the potential power of growth in Canada for other sports, at the possible expense of hockey, with globalization.

Canada has hosted soccer matches since the 1860s.<sup>49</sup> In 1904, the Galt Football Club from Canada, playing in the World Football Association league, won the gold medal at the Olympic Games in St. Louis (since this time, Canada's soccer Olympic appearances have not been successes).<sup>50</sup> Canada has once qualified for the World Cup, in 1986, but lost all three games. Canada has some soccer sporting heroes such as Montreal born goalkeeper Joe Kennaway, who played with Glasgow Celtic in the 1930s, winning three Scottish F.A. Cup medals and two Scottish Championship medals.<sup>51</sup> Canadian teams have participated in various North American professional leagues since the late 1960s, but in many cases, both teams and leagues have folded.<sup>52</sup>

Soccer participation in Canada and the world today, particularly at the youth and recreational levels is sky scraping in comparison to hockey. The Federation de Internationale Football Association (FIFA), based in Zurich, is the sport's international governing body; it presides over the World Cup. FIFA studies into worldwide soccer participation are staggering: one in every 25 people in the world regularly plays soccer according to a 2000 survey of FIFA's 204 member associations.<sup>53</sup> These 240 million people include, worldwide, nearly 18 million children.<sup>54</sup> The same survey identified a little more than 1.35 million adults and 653,000 Canadian kids regularly playing in Canada.<sup>55</sup>



According to the Canadian Soccer Association, registrations in organized soccer have nearly tripled since 1988 through to 2006 from under 300,000 to nearly 855,000.<sup>56</sup> These numbers are lower than the FIFA counts, which includes "occasional," unorganized participation.

Hockey Canada data on player registration indicates a modest gain of about 46,000 players from the 1995/1996 season to 2005/2006.<sup>57</sup> A perfect registration comparison between hockey and soccer, however, is hindered by Hockey

Canada including junior players in their accounting. Still, hockey registration at the minor level is relatively stagnant, while soccer in Canada has experienced significant gains in participation at all levels and ages. The following graph depicts youth registration for both sports in the years for which data for each is available.<sup>58</sup>

Given participation levels, the non-winter sport of soccer is increasingly becoming part of the routines and rhythms of otherwise hockey-dominant Canadian life. Still, sport as a force in a country is not the same as sport as an activity that people play.<sup>59</sup> Canadians could play more and more soccer, attendance at soccer matches such as Toronto's new professional team could rise, too. Vancouver (with Seattle) could be successful in winning the right to host the 2018 World Cup of soccer.<sup>60</sup> But Canadians could still live and breathe hockey, even if in a "globalized" soccer country and world.

Evidence hockey may be becoming less important to Canada, and that this importance has been historically inflated for political reasons, media interests, and technology is not to be pessimistic, but descriptive. Besides, the subjective factors of national identities are inventions. In other words, Canada may become progressively less hockey-crazed, but hockey can remain part of what Canada is and will be. Even a diminished hockey component of national identity can serve to remind Canadians of what they have shared in the past: the love of a game mixed in with the continuous search for commonalities.<sup>61</sup> However, any further decline of the importance of hockey to Canada's national identity could have implications for the future of Canada as a single state. Hockey has overcome tensions such as regionalism, ethnicity, cultural imperialism, and economic differences. These are tensions that have led to the dissolution, violent or otherwise, of other states with similar divisions. Without the familiar route of the Zamboni, it may be difficult to keep diverse, insecure Canada together as one team. The scores of each hockey game (never mind the confusing overtimes in the NHL) provide clear results in an unsettled country

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## ENDNOTES

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