

What's an Identity For?

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It's been quite a week. We wake up one morning and discover in our newspaper that Canada is now under the military command of a U.S. proconsul. Sound familiar? Remember when Douglas MacArthur ruled Japan after World War II as American proconsul? Or when Julius Caesar ruled the defeated province of Gaul as Roman proconsul?

Then Wendy Dobson informs us in the paper she wrote for the C.D. Howe Institute that such a security arrangement with the United States may be no bad thing. Indeed, she argues, we need a "Big Idea" to achieve North American physical and economic security. Apparently, to attract the attention of the Americans, little baby-step capitulations such as surrendering control of our defence of North America to an American proconsul simply won't cut it. No, we need to bargain both our military and economic sovereignty with the United States in order to convince Americans that we are really serious about getting richer together with them.

Prof. Dobson is pleased to describe her Big Idea as "exercising" our sovereignty, not "guarding" it. In other words, we willingly choose to negotiate our sovereignty over such trifles as energy, border security, immigration, and defence policy (her list) in order to reach the greatest goal of all, a higher living standard, achieving "the benefits of a customs union or a common market as far as possible without the harmonization that would undermine political independence."

But obsessive fixation with improving living standards to the exclusion of all other goals will, in fact, severely undermine our political independence and national sovereign-

ty in two ways. First, by making living standards the only meaningful measure of comparison with the United States, we completely distort the idea of what it means to be a sovereign country.

Second, worshipping living standards above all other values means the inevitable relegation to minor status of other important traditional expressions of sovereignty and nationhood, such as defence, immigration, border controls, energy, health care, gun control, tax systems, and environment policy, to name a few.

"Standard of living" tells us only one thing, albeit a very important thing, about a country: our real income per capita. In 2000, of the countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Canada ranked seventh, with only two countries, Luxembourg and the United States, significantly outranking us.

Sovereignty, however, is not uniquely or primarily a matter of living standards. Sovereignty is the expression and defence of our shared values, our history, our culture, our traditions, and our institutions in this particular patch of global geography.

The primary purpose in creating and preserving a country is not simply to improve living standards. It is to build the kind of society that best reflects our collective aspirations. We measure the success of achieving that ambition by the quality of life, social, environmental, and economic, we make for ourselves as Canadians. In short, modern societies need to think of a "triple bottom line": society, environment, and the economy.

And while these three elements can also be visualized as a virtuous circle (and should be), it is important to be

explicit and firm about the third-place ranking of standard of living in our hierarchy of national values when it comes to making tough public-policy tradeoffs. For too long, the economic imperative (which is interchangeable with the standard-of-living imperative) has gone unchallenged in our national discourse.

Those who argue for lower taxes to bring us closer to the United States, for example, are quite prepared to diminish social programs, such as public health care, as a consequence. Those who argue against the Kyoto Protocol do so with no sense of tomorrow. That's why the hierarchy matters.

Those who argue that a higher quality of life depends uniquely on a higher standard of living should remind themselves of a useful report by the Conference Board of Canada in 2001 that examined quality-of-life indicators in several OECD countries.

Sweden ranks seventeenth among OECD countries in standard of living, but was the top performer in the categories of innovation and environment. Japan ranks thirteenth in standard of living, but had the best record on health. While the United States was a leader in standard of living, it had the highest rate of poverty, one of the lowest rates of life expectancy, and the highest crime rate. Thus, it appears that a single-minded obsession with standard of living may actually undermine quality of life.

The debate over standard of living is important, but it is essentially meaningless if it is not placed in the larger context of what it means to be this sovereign country, on this continent.

By focusing too much on the standard-of-living argument and the relentless economic comparisons and

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linkages with the United States, while ignoring equally significant social and environmental comparisons, we risk jeopardizing our sovereignty and freedom of choice on all fronts.

Sovereign countries determine their own destinies. They have the power to

make choices, and they exercise those choices. They balance the economic imperative against equally important national goals. They exist to fulfill purposes, and those purposes are not exclusively economic. They fulfill those purposes by embarking on great

national projects that require collective thought, dedication, and effort to improve the quality of life of their citizens.

Otherwise, why have a country?