“A very short list of Canadian values”

Few notions can accurately be described as universally held Canadian values, despite what politicians tell us

Neil Macdonald · Senior Correspondent · [CBC News](http://www.cbc.ca/beta/news/cbc-news-online-news-staff-list-1.1294364), September 13, 2016

The symbiosis between reporters and attention-seeking politicians has seldom been so nakedly obvious as in the past week.

It was a slow news week in Ottawa, so the parliamentary press gallery went after the story about screening immigrants for "Canadian values" like a beagle on a hamburger.

The Opposition MP who proposed it was no doubt thrilled; [the proposal](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/leitch-responds-survey-question-1.3746470) did what it was intended to do, generating some precious name recognition. You can't buy that. So the proposal was a political success.

The coverage was largely unimaginative, with repeated alerts about "dog whistles," the notion that the proposal held a scarcely hidden right-wing, nativist, anti-immigrant, let's-keep-Canada-as-white-and-Christian-and-straight-as-possible agenda, which, let's face it, is unlikely.

But the opportunity to discuss the notion of whether there actually is any such thing as a universally held Canadian value was missed.

Pity. It's a discussion worth having, and it's remarkable how quickly it becomes a reductionist exercise, because there are precious few notions that can accurately be described as universally held Canadian values or principles, no matter what our politicians tell us.

**Trudeau's long list**

Generally, the values named by our leaders are merely what they think people should believe.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, for example, seems to have an endless list of what he likes to call "core Canadian values" (as opposed, presumably, to non-core ones). Most are mushy and ill-defined.

Mutual respect is one of his favourites. Tolerance is another. He once named freedom as the supreme Canadian value. His health minister recently named a negative: not being able to buy your way to the front of a waiting list for health care.

And of course the value Trudeau most often praises is diversity for its own sake, which of course amounts to jamming all sorts of conflicting values systems into the same polity.

But most of those things, while worthy-sounding, tend to unravel when challenged.

Mutual respect can be exceedingly rare. Why, for example, should any respect be accorded the trolls who fill the comments sections of websites with ad hominem bile, or racist trash? Why tolerate intolerance, bullies or nasty fools?

And there are people of goodwill who are uninterested in many of the values comprised in diversity, especially those dictated by religion. People are perfectly entitled to embrace them, but that doesn't make them "Canadian values."

**Values spelled out in charter?**

A better place to go looking for Canadian values, you'd think, is in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the centrepiece of our basic law.

But that modern legal document begins, jarringly, with this sentence:

"Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law."

The sentence is true only insofar as Canada's founders were a group of professed Christians who no doubt regarded the conversion of heathens as some sort of good, and who sought to exclude the emergence of an absolute ruler for the nation they were creating.

But belief in God, with the moral dictation that usually comes with it, can actually be offensive to atheists. And rule of law, while an admirable legal concept, can become majoritarianism without a Supreme Court willing to strike down laws that offend democracy.

Democracy is a value. Rule of law is not; it is a legal concept subject to values.

The charter does go on to list several rights that do in principle exist to one extent or another in Canada, but few of which can truly be described as universally cherished Canadian values or beliefs.

**Reasonable limits**

Freedom of speech, for example. Some Canadians, even on university campuses, seem to believe people need protection from speech, not the other way around. Canada outlaws "hate speech" and the provinces have human rights commissions with quasi-judicial power that can pursue individuals for offensive statements.

Follow that logic, though, and only inoffensive speech is deserving of protection.

And there are plenty of people in this country who do not believe in freedom of assembly, or even association, for those whose views they regard as hateful. The "God Hates Fags" bunch who haunt military funerals in the U.S. would likely be arrested here.

(The police aren't too keen on free assembly sometimes, either. See: "kettling.")

In fact, by any sensible measure, freedom is more of an American preoccupation than Canadian. We believe in freedom, but within, you know, reasonable limits.

The charter does, however, contain a few truly universal Canadian values; things that most citizens can and do agree upon, no matter where they dwell on the political spectrum.

One citizen, one vote, for example. Or the equality of men and women. Or equal benefit of the law, regardless of "race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability."

I would probably add the protection of the most vulnerable among us, although there are many among us who like to pretend the vulnerable are not really very vulnerable.

If you don't believe in those things — and most countries don't — well, there are other places to live.

**Keep core values core**

Asking new immigrants if they believe in the few truly universal values Canada stands for should be unremarkable. It's at least as sensible as making them swear allegiance to a foreign queen and "all her heirs and successors."

But the longer the values list gets, the shakier and more jingoistic it gets, and sooner or later you start regarding yourself as "exceptional," and start demanding that your politicians declare it true. The way our neighbours do.

Best to keep core values core: a short, simple, self-evident list. And politicians have a devil of a time doing that.