Simpson, Jeffrey. “State of the nation”. *The Globe and Mail*, July 1, 2016.

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If a country can be measured by its arguments, Canada is a lucky country indeed.

We have made many mistakes. We have had our share of dramas and crises, real or imagined. We should not be where we are, a united and prosperous country, if language or ethnicity or religion or geographic propinquity or some ordered arrangements of what it takes to be Canadian had established the proper definition for a country.

But here we are: the world's second-oldest federation, heading toward our 150th anniversary, a country that came into its modern form at about the same time as Germany, Italy and Meiji Japan, without having inflicted tragedies on the world that these countries did at previous times. A country that argues over such matters as federal-provincial relations and the shape and powers of the Senate is funnelling emotions into time-consuming but rather harmless pursuits.

"Never" should always be used with discretion, so with appropriate restraint it can be asserted that Canada has moved past the threat of national dismemberment, the drama of which provided consuming material for reporting and reflection for more than half of a long career. Today, after two referendums and decades of existential debate, the large majority of Quebeckers do not think the game of secession is worth the candle. Quebec and the rest of Canada have drifted somewhat apart but remain within the same political structure, without many of the old irritations. The prism of Quebec's restlessness through which the federal government, and many of us in the media, used to see the country's priorities has shifted more to the West, as is appropriate given population, economics and politics.

Those decades of internal debate were debilitating. They distracted so much attention from other issues; they distended so many public policies that we are all much the better for their passing. When we look at Scotland and Catalonia, and the scabrous nationalism at work in other European countries, the passage of Canada through threats to its own dissolution represents a triumph at home and a modest example abroad.

From Western Canada came angst and anger about the raw deal the region asserted that it had always received within Canada. Elements of resentment still exist, and can flare up at any time, but for some years now populism has significantly abated, one reason being that a federal government with a strong contingent from Western Canada, and led by an Albertan (Stephen Harper), ran the federal government for almost a decade. The old cry "the West Wants In" was answered. It arrived.

A considerable and healthy readjustment in attitudes has occurred, perhaps without Canadians being fully cognizant of the change. What an old friend once described as Canada's "malignant sense of regional envy" is on its way to partial healing. A country with our distances and diversities, and historical memories, will never be free from the sense that somewhere else has had, or is getting, a better deal. This sense has diminished. A much stronger sense of national accomplishment has taken hold – a sense of pride that goes beyond government and has become deeply rooted. We are no longer modest about ourselves, for better and worse.

The single greatest accomplishment in modern Canada has been the integration of millions and millions of people from every continent, without any political backlash, as we see in Europe and the United States. This massive demographic transformation has been accommodated in a way that is remarkable by any international measure, with a social peace that is envied by all who come and study what has happened. It is one of the profound ironies of Canada – one that no one even thinks about – that although we praise multiculturalism and have even placed the idea in the Constitution, we are the most integrationist country in the Western world. Because there is no defined way of being "Canadian," it affords the country flexibility in attitude and institutions to make integration into one of the two official language groups successful. This flexibility is combined with what the U.S. historian David Hackett Fischer has called Canada's distinguishing trait – tolerance – to make multiculturalism a source of pride and strength.

There is always business to be completed, and in one area we have barely begun. When it comes to aboriginals, and their place in Canada, we are groping toward the future which in the opinion of many aboriginals should be what they thought the past would look like: harmonious and mutually respectful relations between their "nations" and those who came later. History, however, did not unfold that way. Canada is a deeply integrationist country; we tried in the past to make that pattern apply to aboriginals, to school them in our ways and to instruct them in our religions, without of course giving them a role in our institutions, while simultaneously frustrating their desires and capacities to develop their own.

It is very difficult in an integrationist society, in which tolerance is extended, provided over time integration occurs, for the majority easily to accept that one group, any group, let alone many groups, should have special claims; and it is equally hard for those who think of themselves as historic "nations" to accept that their economic circumstances are too often marginal, and that their communities are afflicted by social ills. Their sense of "nationhood" cannot be extinguished, for it is rooted in memory, facts and occupation of territory; but that sense of self-governing "nationhood" is difficult to put into operation when the "nations" involved comprise often fewer than several thousand people and in many instances fewer than 1,000.

Long and difficult attempts beckon at reconstructing this relationship that will require deeper understanding on the part of non-aboriginals, and self-criticism within aboriginal communities that moves beyond their entrenched narrative of victimization. Some day, there will be an aboriginal Obama, a transcendent figure of unity and hope.

Canada's political system, which journalists are alert to critique because tension between the elected and the press is part of democracy, has been the subject of many assaults, the latest being that the first-past-the-post voting system should be changed. Nothing has changed the political system more, in the sense of diluting its importance in governing the country, than the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, by far the single biggest change since the Second World War to Canada's institutions and assumptions.

As the distinguished political scientist Peter Russell has observed, the Charter moved the country from a parliamentary democracy to a constitutional democracy. In the sense that the Charter reflected and abetted a "rights-conscious" citizenry, and provided a vast new field for political and social conflicts to be argued, the Charter has made Canada a far more litigious society than it was before the Charter. In this, the Charter has been the single most Americanizing influence on Canadian politics – far more than free trade with the United States, whose critics insisted would cost Canada its public health-care system, pensions, social programs and fresh water – utterly false fears which the critics have never recanted.

Pull back from the day-to-day debates and arguments, and we can observe that Canada has been as well-governed, if not better-governed, than most Western democracies, despite existential and other challenges of the past half-century. This nearly 150-year-old political system, the subject of much criticism, has stood the tests of time and change, in the sense of providing stability, showing flexibility and producing many sensible public politics under different political parties.

Contrast Canada's governance to the now-dysfunctional political system in the United States. Or the inability of many countries in Europe to find solid financial footing, let alone to fulfill the dreams of a united Europe and deal with evolving demographics. Canada has built strong financial foundations, having learned about the perils of accumulated debt in the 1970s and 1980s. Economic growth has been steady if not spectacular, apart from the 1981-1982 recession and the worldwide financial crisis of 2008-2009.

At its best, Canada has tried to play a constructive role in the world, although it is one of the country's apparently unshakeable mythologies that we contribute more than we do internationally when measured in money dispersed for aid, defence and diplomacy. Social programs have emerged. Health care, far from being the best in the world as Canadians continue to believe, is not the worst either. The financing of public pensions is solid. The reduction of poverty among seniors has been a major public-policy achievement, although poverty taken as a whole remains too high. These are successes, often forgotten in the swirl of daily comment and criticism.

We journalists tend to focus on what goes wrong and what needs fixing. But a career of criticism and cajoling should not cause those of us who have practised this craft to forget, as the curtain falls, that the best journalists should always try to see things in the round; that they should be reporters first; that they themselves are never the story and therefore should avoid the narcissism of writing about themselves; that if they are any good at all they will remain romantics at heart; that the men and women about whom they write come from among us and therefore do their best at a difficult job; and that journalists practise their craft because it offers, as the first and arguably best Globe and Mail political columnist, George Bain, once advised a young successor, "two seats in the front row to the best show in town."