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TRUE
PATRIOT
LOVE

FOUR GENERATIONS IN
SEARCH OF CANADA



*True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!*

(FROM "O CANADA!," THE NATIONAL ANTHEM OF CANADA)

I

On the Love of Country

Loving a country is an act of the imagination. We start from what we know—the street where we grew up, the brightly lit skating rinks at night, the tingle of the lake water when we first plunge in, the feeling when we set our feet back on native soil—and we make these parts stand for the whole. What we know is only a fragment of what is there. We have to imagine the expanse we have not seen. We have to imagine the ties that bind us to our fellow citizens, many of whom may not even speak the same language. We reason out from the rituals we share, the rights

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we enjoy, the traditions we hold in common—and we imagine belonging to a place we can call home. Our political system, the leaders, the laws, the symbols and anthems matter to us because, when they work as they should, they give us the feeling that we share a life in common with the strangers we call fellow citizens.

We engage in this act of imagination because we need to. The lives we live alone do not make sense to us unless we share some public dimension with others. We need a public life in common, some set of reference points and allegiances to give us a way to relate to the strangers among whom we live. Without this feeling of belonging, even if only imagined, we would live in fear and dread of each other. When we can call the strangers citizens, we can feel at home with them and with ourselves. Isaiah Berlin described this sense of belonging well. He said that to feel at home is to feel that people understand not only what you say, but also what you mean. You love the country because it gives you the possibility of feeling at home. You cannot feel this alone. Your emotions must be shared with others in order for them to make any sense at all. A solitary patriot is a contradiction in terms. Love of country is an emotion shared in the imagination across time, shared with the dead, the living and the yet to be born.

Love of country, being imagined, is not a natural feeling like hunger. Human beings invented the complex emotions we feel for nations only in the eighteenth

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century. What we imagine we can forget. What we dream we can lose. Countries, being human creations, can experience both birth and death.

A country begins to die when people think life is elsewhere and begin to leave. It begins to die when order disintegrates, when people cease to trust their fellow citizens or their government. In a country that is truly alive, the laws hold us in obedience, not just through fear of punishment but also through attachment to the values and traditions the laws protect. If this attachment wanes, if obedience is reduced to fear, either chaos or tyranny beckons.

While love of country has to be shared, the feelings that are shared are not necessarily the same for every citizen. Patriotism is a contested emotion because countries are contested places. Citizens disagree with each other about what the country should stand for, what its traditions mean and what path it should take in the future. These disagreements are intrinsic to the life of any country that calls itself free. If such disagreements weren't a necessary part of public life, we wouldn't need politics. But we do. Politics is how we manage public disagreement without resorting to violence. If our politics is good enough, we can keep our disagreements civil, but that's not to say free of anger. Some of the best patriots I have met have been the angriest. Their love of country expressed itself in fury at some act—a wrongful war, a terrible decision—that they believed betrayed the country's best ideals.

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To be a citizen is to belong but also to argue. People will even argue about love of country itself. Some citizens, often the most thoughtful ones, don't love their country and don't believe you should love it either. They don't believe in the emotion itself. They will tell you it is false or made up, even a kind of collective delusion. They will tell you that love of country is old-fashioned and out of style. The world has moved on. Borders are porous. National traditions are no longer self-contained. Cultures are no longer closed to the outside world. Besides, the old national passions brought war and intolerance in their wake. The right emotions to have, they say, are global and cosmopolitan. Why should I feel more for my native land, they say, than I do for Paris, London or New York? These places are the centre of my world. Don't talk to me about your love of country and, whatever you do, don't ram it down my throat.

To be a patriot in the modern age is to be in a perpetual argument with cosmopolitans. The best argument on the cosmopolitan side is that no allegiance—certainly no national identity—ought to claim all of a person. A true patriot should learn from these arguments. The frontiers of a country should never be the frontiers of a person's world. Those unwilling to learn from languages, cultures and traditions beyond the boundaries of their own are in prison, even if they may not notice the bars. From a moral point of view, the strength of the cosmopolitan view is its

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association with the universal, as opposed to the merely national. The claim of one's country should never be total. A true patriot can always admit the limitations of home. A true patriot can always see the place for what it is.

The best argument on the patriot's side is that cosmopolitan attachments depend on the security countries provide. Cosmopolitanism is the privilege of those with a passport, the luxury enjoyed by those with a country of their own. Those who don't think they need a country, those who believe they are beyond the local attachments of a national state, ought to visit a refugee camp. There they will discover people dying, sometimes literally, to get into a country they can call their own. Statelessness is the very definition of modern hell. Just ask illegal immigrants or people without papers what they want. They want a country.

Countries not only protect us; they provide us with legitimate order. Tyrannies provide the order without the legitimacy. Democracies engender love—and therefore legitimacy—because they ask their citizens to participate in public affairs. The rituals of political participation—voting, campaigning, raising money, standing as a candidate—ought to leave us feeling that we live in a public world that, however imperfectly, reflects the popular sovereignty we exercise with others.

We may not like the decisions that are made in our name, but we know we have a way to change them, and we know who can be held responsible for the mistakes made

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in our name. The people who make the decisions are no better and no worse than we are. When we feel that the authority exercised in our name is legitimate, we can live with the assurance that the country will cohere and survive into the future. Countries provide us with public meaning, with continuity in time.

To love anyone is to feel responsible for them, to want to watch over and keep them from harm. To love a country is to feel the same, to feel responsible for public affairs, to feel angry when things are going badly, to feel good when things are going well and, above all, to feel that you have some small role in shaping the course of public affairs.

Those who shelter in the protection of their country, those who benefit from legitimate authority, have no obligation to love their country. Attempts have been made to compel people to display their patriotism. The result has been tyranny. Like all forms of love, love of country must be free, or it is nothing but a sham.

All the same, those who freely love their country often feel themselves to be in a retrograde minority. In the face of all the people who believe love of country old-fashioned, or downright dangerous, patriots have to stand up for their convictions. If you are a patriot in the modern world, you have some explaining to do.

You also should be ready to laugh at yourself. There is much, after all, that is ridiculous about patriotism. Parodies of patriotism—Mounties singing “I’m a lumber-

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jack and I'm okay"—sometimes have more life in them than the national anthem. Then there is the embarrassment of standing at attention with fellow citizens you neither like nor trust. You can almost hear them thinking the country would be a better place if it had fewer people like you in it. Yet you stand together, side by side. Solidarity always entails moments like these. Love of country can't endure unless it sees the ironic side of itself.

Yet only so much irony is possible, because love of country is a sentimental and sincere emotion—one that can't afford to be too complicated before it just falls apart. With love of country, you have to keep it simple. You love what you love, and that's good enough for you.

Still, you may also know a lot of things about your country that you have trouble admitting. Patriotism can be expressed in the conditional. If only we had decent leadership. If only we could dig ourselves out of our debts. If only we could extricate ourselves from this war.

People love their country despite a lot of things, despite the president, despite the prime minister, despite some recent scandal, embarrassment, war, famine, conflict, economic disaster. They love it because they haven't given up on it. They love it because of its unrealized possibilities.

We love our country not because we think it is perfect or even satisfactory, but because we think it can change for the better. Love of country requires us to be forgiving of the way things are. Leaders come and go. The people who

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Speak on behalf of the country sometimes let us down. The country itself changes all the time, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, yet the potential for its redemption endures. This same potential endures in each of us.

A country's past is rarely always glorious, and a true patriot is obliged to be truthful, to acknowledge the dark with the light. The morality of patriotism turns on being both truthful and hopeful at the same time: truthful about the dark passages, hopeful that the light passages promise better days in the future.

We never love a country just for what it is. We love it for what it might yet become. The same is true for the love we bear ourselves. Love is always rooted in hope.