

THIS EXCHANGE APPEARED IN THE LITERARY REVIEW OF CANADA. DAVID FRUM'S PIECE ORIGINALLY APPEARED ON NOVEMBER 9, 2003 IN THE NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE.

PLAYING THE NUMBERS GAME

June 2004

Review of *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada, and the Myth of Converging Values* by David Frum:

Canada and the United States are different – and becoming more so. That is the bold thesis of *Fire and Ice*, a new book by one of Canada's best-known pollsters, Michael Adams of Environics Research. On a recent trip across Canada, I was asked so often about Adams' work that I realized I was witnessing the birth of a new orthodoxy.

So I bought *Fire and Ice* at a bookstore in the Ottawa airport and read it carefully. I was so astonished by what I saw there that I sat down this past weekend and read it again. The second reading was even more disturbing than the first. The more carefully one studies it, the more apparent it becomes that this fall's leading Canadian high-brow bestseller is an intellectual card-trick.

Start with the basics. Michael Adams claims to have accumulated massive survey data proving that Canadians and Americans live by radically different values. He rests this claim on the "values map" he draws based on three major surveys of U.S. opinion over the past ten years and on regular surveys of Canadians.

Now one of the most basic rules of polling is this: If you want to compare the answers of two different groups of people, you have to ask them the same questions. Yet a reader has to trudge all the way to the very back of the book – to the sixth of its seven technical appendixes – to discover that Adams did no such thing. As he acknowledges "only about half" of the questions in his Canadian and U.S. surveys are the same.

That's not good - and it gets worse. Polls are only as reliable as the questions they are made of. Adams does not reveal the questions he asks – a disturbing and unexplained omission. Yet if you turn to his website and take a small sample of his survey yourself, you get some feeling for how tendentious Adams' questioning is.

One example out of many. An effective pollster asks questions in a neutral way, so as to encourage those polled to answer honestly and without embarrassment. If I ask: "Do you support the U.S. armed forces in their fight against terrorism in Iraq," I may produce the illusion of an 80% majority in favor of President Bush's policies – but I won't learn very much about what Americans think. Here is how Adams asks Canadians their view of immigration: "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'Overall, there is too much immigration. It threatens the purity of our country.'" No doubt, Adams' question produced a very high pro-immigration number. Who wants to tell a stranger

over the phone that he's concerned about racial purity? But was it an accurate number? Almost certainly not.

Yet even after Adams asks his slanted questions – and then takes them into the back room and uses them to create “value profiles” by methods that are never revealed to his readers – even after all this: his data contradict his case. Those readers who are interested can turn to page 81. There they will see that by Adams' own showing, the values of almost all the regions of North America cluster closely together, with two significant exceptions: the conservative Deep South and ultra-permissive, ultra-secular Quebec. If Adams is to be believed, North America is really a common culture divided between two political systems, one tilted to the left by one unusual region, the other tilted to the right by another.

In general, I'm very cautious about invoking “values” or “culture” to explain the differences between groups of people, and especially near neighbors like Canadians and American. Not that values don't differ and not that these differences are not important – but there are many other differences, much less nebulous and hard to define, that should be considered first.

Adams for instance at one point notes that SUVs outsell minivans 2 to 1 in the United States, while minivans outsell SUVs 2 to 1 in Canada. Suppose that this datum is in fact accurate. What does it prove? Well perhaps it proves, as Adams suggests, that Canadians are more caring and environmentally sensitive than Americans. But over the 1990s, Canadian standards of living fell dramatically behind those in the United States. Before the recent rise in the value of the Canadian dollar, the average Canadian had only about 70% percent as much money to spend as the average American. Minivans are generally cheaper than SUVs. Anybody who ignores money when trying to explain why people buy what they do is not going to arrive at a very convincing explanation.

Am I saying that Canadians and Americans are culturally identical? Certainly not. But I am saying that the differences between the two nations deserve honest and unbiased study – and that the book on which all too many Canadians are relying to analyze those differences does not meet that standard.

Response to review by Michael Adams:

Dear Mr. Frum:

It was recently drawn to my attention that you criticized my book *Fire and Ice* at a conference sponsored by the Canadian Institute of International Affairs in Calgary on Saturday March 27.

News of your criticism prompted me to seek out a more complete account of your

objections to *Fire and Ice*, which I found in your review of the book published in the *National Review Online* last November. I regret that I did not learn of this review sooner as I believe your critique raises worthwhile points and deserves a response.

First, I would like to address your concern that our surveys of Canadians and Americans were composed of disparate questions and thus did not constitute a legitimate basis for a comparative study of the two societies. It is true that of all the questions we asked in both countries in 1992, 1996, and 2000, only about half (a little over 100 items in each of the three surveys) were identical. But it was these questions—those that were asked in exactly the same form in both countries—that were the *sole* basis of our quantitative analysis. In the book, I mention as a matter of potential interest to readers that portions of our batteries are unique to one country or the other, but the comparative analysis we perform in *Fire and Ice* relies exclusively on Canadian and American respondents' answers to identical—and thus legitimately comparable—questions.

Second, you raise the objection that our questions were biased, and thus likely yielded unreliable results. The example you offer is "Overall, there is too much immigration. It threatens the purity of our country." This, of course, represents an extreme point of view, and citizens of either country who agree with it are part of a slim minority. But we ask this question and others like it not to, as you suggest, make one society or the other seem to favour immigration more than it actually does. We ask it to measure the degree of xenophobic sentiment in a society. Moreover, this statement is only one of several in the questionnaire designed to help us understand orientations to immigrants and minority racial and ethnic groups in many countries, not just Canada and the United States.

I try to make clear to my readers that our research is not the standard polling one finds reported in the media every day. For example, polls, including our own, find that nine of ten Canadians and the same proportion of Americans identify with people who put their family above everything else. In our social values surveys, we seek to deepen our understanding of that finding, for example by determining what people mean when they refer to family. To this end, we examine among other things respondents' orientation to patriarchy.

As you likely recall from your readings of *Fire and Ice*, one of the items we use to measure orientation to the traditional father-led family is the statement: "The father of the family must be master in his own home," with which respondents are asked to strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree. The statement itself is considered politically incorrect by many but perfectly reasonable to others. Indeed, it is so plainly normative to some that I have been upbraided (by a visiting Latin American academic) for wasting time asking people to confirm the obvious. I can assure you we posed this item in 1992 with no preconceived notion of the responses we would elicit from Americans, although we had by then more than a decade of tracking in Canada. Only after the three waves were completed in 2000 did I really begin to focus on what these data and the responses to the other comparable items over the three waves were telling me about the two countries.

Our analysis is not designed to forward some political agenda (say, to drum up support for immigration or, as in your example, demonstrate how strongly Americans support the war in Iraq). It is designed to go beyond the superficial roller-coaster of public opinion polls, to illuminate the range and depth of respondents' values, and on an interpretive level, to examine how those values might be driving social, political, and consumer trends. We use our data to compare groups of respondents to each other (as when we compare Canadians to Americans) or to themselves over time (as when we show which values are growing or declining within each society). The point here is that the questions we ask can sometimes be provocative, like the one you cite, but their seeming bias does not corrupt our findings in the slightest. If five per cent of Americans agree with a statement widely viewed as unreasonable, and twenty per cent of Canadians agree with the same statement, that is a worthwhile finding—no matter how unreasonable the statement might be. And if the proportions agreeing or disagreeing with the statement increase or decrease over time, that too can be significant.

Third, regarding the same question on immigration, you raise the concern that respondents are not likely to state an unpopular view about “ethnic purity” to an interviewer in a telephone survey. This is a serious concern, and it is one reason why we do not conduct our surveys by telephone. Our written surveys are hand-delivered to respondents in their homes by trained researchers, who explain how the surveys are to be completed and answer any questions the respondents might have. The respondents are then left to complete the surveys in private over the next several days. When the surveys are complete, they are collected by our researchers, who are charged with the serious responsibility of preserving respondents' anonymity.

Fourth, you express concern that our methods are not transparent and that we perform “intellectual card tricks” behind a curtain of secrecy. While we do not explain our methods extensively in the main body of the book—not to conceal our devious tricks, but because we fear such explanations might bore the average reader—we do provide what I have been told is a tediously complete account of our methods in the book's appendices (of which, as you note with justifiable weariness, there are seven).

I am most troubled by your suspicion of our research methods because it seems to suggest that some agenda or other underlies the conclusions I draw in the book. I assure you that the arguments I make in *Fire and Ice* are not meant to be remotely ideological. True, many liberal Canadians have embraced the book because, as they see it, it affirms the possibility that Canada's distinct (and more left-leaning) public policies have a viable future despite our close ties to the more conservative United States.

But the article I recently published in *The Walrus* might easily be seen as grist for the conservative mill. I state that despite liberal hand-wringing about the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and subsequently NAFTA, our ongoing cultural divergence suggests that economic harmonization with the United States is not eroding Canada's distinct identity (which is of course one of the primary objections to freer trade).

Finally, I would like to note that my colleagues and I consulted and enjoyed your book on

the 70s in researching *Fire and Ice*. On the significance of that pivotal decade you and I certainly agree. In 1980, after all, Americans ushered in a new morning by electing Ronald Reagan, while Canadians reelected the inimitable Pierre Trudeau: an emphatic statement of the two countries' difference, with important consequences that will undoubtedly persist well into the future.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Adams