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CITIZENSHIP OCTOBER 2009

*How I got in touch with my inner Canadian*

BY WILL WILKINSON

Go North, Young Man!

IMAGE CREDIT: MICHAEL BYERS/LEVY CREATIVE

AS THE CLOCK struck midnight on [April 17, 2009](#), the Canadian citizenship of my Saskatchewan-born but subsequently naturalized American father was restored. And thus, thanks to [Bill C-37](#), an amendment to the [Canadian Citizenship Act](#), so was mine. Under its terms, all Canadians who had lost their citizenship when they took on a new nationality—i.e., Canadians like my dad, who became an American in June 1965—regained it, as did their first generation of offspring.

Maybe it takes an Iowan to get stoked about becoming Canadian, but I was sufficiently stoked to travel to Ottawa a couple days shy of this magical moment so that I would suddenly become always Canadian in Canada's capital, among other so-called lost Canadians.

I work for a libertarian think tank, and libertarians are supposed to disdain the land of *poutine* and Dan Aykroyd for its socialist health-care system and general failure to really love liberty. Yet not only can you get gay-married in any of the provinces, or almost-legally take up in your toque up there, but Canada's economy is also slightly freer than that of the global hegemon to its south. According to the [Cato Institute](#), at least.

But even more important to me is the conviction—a libertarian conviction, I believe—that crossing national borders ought to differ little from crossing the imagined line between Iowa and Minnesota. That's really why I'm so keen about being Canadian. I want my own boundaries to widen, as I'd like everyone's boundaries to widen. Also, I can now put the Canadian flag on my backpack.

After dining with other lost Canadians the evening before I became a citizen, I found myself walking the not-so-mean streets of Ottawa alone an hour before midnight. So I wandered into the [Royal Oak](#), an English pub on Bank Street. I persuaded some game locals, Austin and Rachele, to share a toast and snap my picture in front of the Maple Leaf hanging behind the bar. Midnight! To gain a citizenship in one magical moment, without exertion or will, is to experience as an adult the national baptism that comes with birth. I felt exhilarated, if a bit of a fraud. Austin and Rachele were exceedingly kind to me. We exchanged cell-phone numbers. We agreed to connect on Facebook. We all understood that I am a thoroughgoing American, qualifying as Canadian through a weird technicality. But they were happy for me, happy to have me. Because they're Canadians, I suppose.

My first full day as a citizen turned out to be overclimactically surreal. While arranging an interview with [Jason Kenney](#), the

minister of citizenship, immigration, and multiculturalism, I had agreed in passing that his office could point reporters toward me, an example of a newfound Canadian. So the morning of the 17th, I discover that an article about the just-effectuated bill from the Canadian Press wire service begins and ends with the case of Will Wilkinson. (For the first time, it is said that I have an “American” fiancée.) Through Twitter, I learn that a pundit friend in D.C. has received an e-mail from the Canadian government that mentions me by name. I have become the exemplary lost Canadian. I’m vain enough to be tickled and Canadian enough to be mortified, as I tour the carefully curated office of Canada’s first prime minister, [Sir John A. Macdonald](#), with other lost Canadians, many of whom have waited decades for this day.

In the afternoon, I meet with Kenney to discuss the new law. An assistant photographs us shaking hands in front of a flag. The minister himself seems damn happy to have me.

At dinner after our first Canadian day, one of us, Dean Echenberg, a physician from California, produces his Canadian passport, which he has managed to secure on the first possible day. We pass it around the table and marvel. It is real.

I return to Iowa with a Maple Leaf pin on my backpack. I give my American fiancée her present: a ridiculous [action figure of Macdonald](#), complete with reading table and book. He was a “father of confederation,” I explain. I tell her what the enthusiastic Parliament tour guide told me: “Sir John A. Macdonald was a dreamer.”

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