

Political Knowledge of Canadian and Australian High School Students

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Afin d'évaluer la connaissance comparative de leurs propres institutions politiques et de groupes homologues américains, on a demandé à 143 Canadiens et 174 Australiens de 10^{ème} année de répondre à une série de questions communes. On a noté très peu de différence entre les groupes pour ce qui est de la connaissance des institutions de leur propre pays, les Australiens étant les meilleurs; cependant les Canadiens ont montré une connaissance des institutions politiques et de la géographie américaines quelque peu supérieure.

On en a conclu que les observations passées relatives au faible niveau de l'information politique chez les étudiants canadiens avait besoin d'être modifiées et que l'influence américaine en ce domaine n'est pas aussi significative qu'on l'a parfois laissé supposer.

The publication nearly a decade ago of *What Culture? What Heritage?* (Hodgetts, 1968) drew widespread attention to the allegedly low level of information among Canadian high school students with respect to national political institutions. Based upon an examination of 951 classes from a representative cross-section of 247 schools across Canada, the study concluded that "the level of information in most Canadian studies classrooms is so low that the knowledge taken out of them, even if remembered, is unlikely to be useful either to the individual students or to society" (p. 71). It was argued that Canadian students, both English- and French-speaking, lack the "straightforward factual information" needed to cope adequately with questions about the nature of our federal parliamentary institutions (p. 71). The chief implication of these observations was that "their formal civic education has not given them a mutually shared knowledge of the functioning of government, of the realities of federalism and the British North America Act, and other information that will be necessary to make reasonably unbiased decisions about questions that may determine the future of this country" (p. 72).

The culpability of the education system, from the elementary level to the university, for the ignorance of students about our system of government and political institutions has been pointed to by a number of writers since Hodgetts. The Canadian Student Awareness Survey (Hurtig, 1975) for example, examined the political knowledge and cultural awareness of

over 3500 high school students across the country. The knowledge of government institutions was judged to be very poor and was blamed upon those responsible for educational policy making and teacher education, rather than simply the teachers themselves (Hurtig, 1975, p. 11). The failure of Canadian studies in the schools was coupled with the undue influence of American theory and practice upon these same educators. This, together with the ubiquitous effects upon children of U.S. content in the mass media was judged to be responsible for the low knowledge level of Canadian students. More seriously, it was linked to a perceived tendency to be disinterested in learning about Canada after leaving school.

Hurtig's study was prompted by the results of a survey sponsored by the Committee for an Independent Canada (Note 1), which found a very low level of factual information about Canadian politics and culture. Among its more startling findings in six Vancouver high schools were the observations that 21% of students were unable to name the capital city of Canada, 38% were unable to name the leader of the federal opposition, and 93% were unable to name the Governor General. Hurtig's own national results were only slightly better: "Knowledge of Canadian geography is almost non-existent, political awareness unbelievable, cultural knowledge abysmal" (1975, p. 10). Hurtig's findings were widely publicized in the Canadian press, together with his suggestions that exciting, relevant Canadian history and contemporary problems be emphasized at the grade 10 or 11 level if a Canadian identity was to be preserved in the face of overwhelming American influence.

Hurtig's findings have usually been accepted at face value as indicating that "students are still grossly uninformed about things Canadian" (Downey, 1976, p. 19), and that this situation is due in large part to the absence of Canadian studies courses in the schools (Waldie, 1977). It should be noted that both of these conclusions are in fact hypotheses based upon somewhat limited evidence. Investigations of the political knowledge of Canadian students (Belovari et al., 1976; Hodgetts, 1968; Hurtig, 1975; Pammett, 1971; Committee for an Independent Canada, Note 1) have not been comparative in the sense of employing an independent standard for evaluating the level of knowledge of Canadian subjects. When comparisons have been made they usually refer to separate American studies involving students who are not comparable with the Canadians investigated. Further, attempts are made to compare political institutions and offices whose functional similarities are certainly less evident than their differences. Belovari et al. (1976), for example, found that 87% of their sample of southern Ontario students were able to identify U.S. Secretary of State Kissinger while only 48% identified the Canadian Minister for External Affairs, "a striking difference . . . considering they each holding the *corresponding office* in each's home country" (p. 36, my emphasis).

Comparative cross-national data are necessary before definitive conclusions are made about the apparent ignorance of Canadian students regarding our political institutions. In order to obtain such data it is necessary to ensure that comparable samples of students are examined, and also that they are questioned about political institutions in their own countries that are in fact equivalent. The second requirement implies that Canadian students might best be evaluated by comparing their performance with that of students from a country having very similar political institutions to Canada, rather than with students from the United States.

COMPARABILITY OF CANADIAN AND AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

As federal, parliamentary democracies Canada and Australia have very similar political systems. The similarities in both the names and functions of institutions make the construction of a set of common basic political questions relatively straightforward. Both countries have bicameral federal legislatures and three major national political parties; both are federations of several provinces or states each having its own parliament and premier with approximately equivalent responsibilities. In Australia as in Canada the Head of State is the Queen, represented by the Governor General and state governors or provincial lieutenant-governors. The constitutions of both countries were created within the relatively recent historical past as acts of the British parliament, both considerably influenced by the example of the United States federal system. Australia like Canada is highly urbanized and industrialized, large in land area and with a small population confined to a narrow strip of land including several large cities. The similarities between the two nations with respect to history and social and political institutions have been discussed elsewhere (Lipset, 1964; Truman, 1971); however, the existence of parallel political institutions facilitates comparisons involving political socialization.

A cross-national comparison of samples of Canadian and Australian students must necessarily be confined to comparable English-speaking children in both countries, and could further offer an opportunity to assess comparative knowledge of the United States within both groups. Provided that equivalent sets of questions concerning their own political institutions and those of the United States were asked, it would then be possible to determine actual relative levels of knowledge, and to obtain some indication of their comparative information about the United States. In consideration of the observations of Hodgetts (1968) and Hurtig (1975) in particular, it is to be anticipated that Australian students will perform relatively better than Canadians on a test of their own political institutions, and that Canadian students will indicate a superior knowledge of the United States.

METHOD

Subjects

The students participating in the present study were selected on the basis of their comparability, and are not considered necessarily representative of Canadian and Australian high school students in general. Subjects were 174 Australian and 143 Canadian grade 10 students attending comparably sized schools in New South Wales and British Columbia. Both samples constitute the entire grade 10 population in their respective schools. Each school is located in an urban community of about 150,000, near a larger city.

Subjects whose native language was not English were deleted, and the two groups were compared in terms of age, socio-economic status, and sex. Testing was carried out three months after the beginning of each school year (November for the Canadian students and April in Australia) to ensure comparable educational advancement. The mean age in both groups was 184 months, with standard deviations of 5 and 7 months for the Australian and Canadian samples respectively.

Seventy-one subjects in the Canadian sample were females (49.6%), while there were 97 females (55.7%) in the Australian group. Socio-economic status was measured using Blishen's (1958) scale for both groups. The Canadian mean was 50.8 (S.D. = 7.8) and the Australian mean 49.3 (S.D. = 6.0) in comparison with Blishen's scale mean of 50 and standard deviation of 10. Differences between the groups for sex and socio-economic status were therefore slight and did not achieve statistical significance. Thus the Canadian and Australian samples are considered equivalent with regard to age, grade level, sex, urban/rural residence, socio-economic status, and linguistic background.

Instrument

The test used consisted of 10 items concerning their own political institutions; these items were common to both Canadian and Australian forms of the instrument. The items were identically worded for both groups except where their own country or province/state was named. The second part of the test involved 10 simple questions about American political institutions, history, and geography.

The instrument was administered by the students' regular homeroom teachers, it being emphasized that results in no way related to their standing at school. No time limit was employed, the twenty items being easily completed in a class period.

RESULTS

Chi-square statistics were computed for comparisons of the proportions of students in each group who answered the items correctly. These data are shown in tables 1 and 2, table 1 comparing knowledge of the students' own

political institutions and table 2 comparing knowledge of the United States. Table 3 indicates items in both content areas for which mean scores were calculated.

Table 1 / Canadian and Australian Grade 10 Students' Knowledge of Their Own Political Institutions

Item	Percentage correct		χ^2	<i>P</i>
	Canadian	Australian		
Who is the prime minister of Canada (Australia)?	96	98	1.74	NS
Who is the leader of the federal opposition in Canada (Australia)?	26	89	127.75	.001
Who was the first prime minister of Canada (Australia)?	66	3	144.00	.001
In what year did Canadian confederation (Australian federation) come into existence?	45	22	19.94	.001
Which political party currently forms the government of British Columbia (New South Wales)?	57	49	1.91	NS
How often must federal elections be held in Canada (Australia)?	13	77	127.82	.001
Name the British statute which formally recognized the full independence of the Dominions, including Canada and Australia.	4	0	7.44	.01

There is no difference between groups with respect to identification of the prime minister, who is virtually universally known. The small difference between groups favoring the Canadians with regard to identification of the Statute of Westminster, however, reflects an equivalent lack of familiarity. Similar proportions of students in both countries are able to name the party forming the government in their own state or province, and knowledge of the two houses in the federal parliament showed no difference across groups. Significantly more Canadian students than Australians were able to identify their country's first prime minister and to state the year of confederation; however, the Australian students showed a superior performance on the remaining four items. These dealt with identification of the leader of the federal opposition, frequency of federal elections, the names of national political parties, and knowledge of former prime ministers.

As shown in tables 2 and 3, there was no significant difference between groups on four items with respect to knowledge of the United States.

Table 2 / Canadian and Australian Grade 10 Students' Knowledge of the United States

Item	Percentage correct		χ^2	<i>P</i>
	Canadian	Australian		
How often must presidential elections be held in the United States?	59	30	26.66	.001
Who was the first president of the United States?	57	49	1.97	NS
Who was the president of the United States during the Civil War?	51	60	2.42	NS
In what year did the United States achieve independence?	46	21	23.32	.001
Which American state has the largest population?	31	17	8.81	.01
Which American city has the largest population?	72	63	3.12	NS
Which American state has the largest land area?	18	10	4.06	.05

Table 3 / Canadian and Australian Grade 10 Students' Knowledge of Their Own and American Political Institutions

Item	Canadian		Australian		<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Name the three major national political parties in Canada (Australia)	1.94	.89	2.63	.75	7.50	.001
List the names of up to five Canadian (Australian) prime ministers	2.50	1.55	3.79	1.18	8.16	.001
Name the two houses in the Federal Parliament of Canada (Australia)	.54	.75	.49	.77	.59	NS
Name the two major American political parties	.87	.96	.47	.78	4.21	.001
Name the two houses in the U.S. Congress	.24	.50	.18	.43	1.20	NS
Name any five U.S. presidents	4.42	1.21	4.10	1.46	2.29	.05

These items concerned the identification of the first president, the president in office during the civil war, and the largest U.S. city, and knowledge of the two houses in the American congress. Although the Canadian students were able to name more U.S. presidents than the Australians the difference, though statistically significant, was slight. The Canadian performance on the remaining five American items was clearly superior to that of the Australian students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results tend to support the expectation that Canadian grade 10 students are significantly better informed about the United States than are a comparable group of Australians. However the expectation that Canadian students know less about their own political institutions is difficult to maintain on the basis of the present data. It appears that either comparable Australian students are almost as "grossly uninformed" (Downey, 1976) as Canadians about their own political institutions, or, perhaps more objectively, that the norm is lower than investigators have assumed.

Certain cautions should be observed in interpreting the results of the present survey. In particular, where differences do exist for some items it may be argued that they result from an absence of true equivalence for those items. For example, the low awareness of the federal opposition leader among the Canadian students may result from his becoming a national political figure relatively recently. The CIC survey (Note 1) found that 62% of subjects were able to identify the then federal opposition leader; and it should further be noted that the then Australian opposition leader was a former prime minister. A similar reservation may be advanced concerning the ability of the Australian students to name more former prime ministers than the Canadians, in view of the fact that Australia has had more prime ministers during the past two decades. It may also be argued that the higher proportion of Canadians able to name their country's first prime minister reflects his greater historical significance in comparison with the first prime minister of Australia.

Indeed, the similar level of knowledge of the two groups about their own political institutions is more striking than the differences that exist with respect to some items. This is particularly so in view of the fact that the items chosen by no means reflect information universally known by the students tested.

The Canadian students have performed better on a number of American questions, as anticipated. However it is interesting to observe that the differences are not extreme. For 6 of the 10 items they are either non-significant or slight. For example, the item requesting the name of the U.S. state having the largest land area was answered correctly by small proportions of both groups despite the fact that the Canadian students

live in a province which shares its longest boundary with that same state. The overall better performance of the Canadian students on the American items does not appear sufficiently marked to interpret it as evidence of overwhelming American influence in this area of knowledge.

Belovari et al. (1976) noted that grade 11 served as something of a dividing line, after which knowledge of political institutions increased significantly. This implies that the school is not an important agent of political socialization for adolescents. Indeed it was found that for grade 10 students, newspapers and television far outweighed teachers as sources of political information. This may help account for the rather similar level of knowledge of their own political institutions among the Canadian and Australian grade 10 students in the present study. The somewhat better overall performance of the Australian sample may be a function of the absence of U.S. cable television in that country, rather than a result of the education system. The same variable may also help account for the better performance of the Canadian students on many of the American test items.

Tomkins (1977) in his comprehensive review of political socialization research in Canada points out that high school history "has not played the socializing role" claimed for it elsewhere, particularly in the United States. While the relationship between political knowledge and attitudes is problematic, it may be that the present results reflect a less compelling concern with political institutions and national identity on the part of Canadian and Australian students than is often assumed to exist in the United States. Tomkins has implied that for Canadians this may be a function of cultural diversity; however the present study suggests that it may stem, in part at least, from something that Canada has in common with Australia — possibly, even, the nature of the parliamentary system and its traditions that the two countries share.

NOTE

This study was facilitated by a grant of the Research and Travel Committee of the University of Victoria. The author wishes to thank Mr. L. B. Gapps, Mitchell High School, New South Wales, for his assistance and cooperation.

REFERENCE NOTE

1. Committee for an Independent Canada. *Canadian awareness survey results*, 1974. (Mimeographed.)

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