

Canada Today

Oil and other natural resources have done much to maintain Canada's enviable economy, but questions linger over whether the environmental price is too high. As for politics, it's the belt-tightening Conservatives against the social-safety-net-championing New Democratic Party and the left-leaning Liberals. Meanwhile, Canada stays proud and progressive on issues of same-sex marriage, immigration and marijuana use.

Best on Film

Bon Cop, Bad Cop (directed by Eric Canuel; 2006) An Anglophone and Francophone join forces; one of Canada's top-grossing films.

Incendies (directed by Denis Villeneuve; 2010) Québec siblings travel to the Middle East and uncover their immigrant mother's tortured history.

Away from Her (directed by Sarah Polley; 2006) Alzheimer's breaks apart a rural Ontario couple.

C.R.A.Z.Y. (directed by Jean-Marc Vallée; 2005) A teen misfit in 1970s Montréal dreams of a brighter future.

Best in Print

Indian Horse (R Wagamese; 2012) A culturally displaced Ojibway boy grows up to become a hockey star.

The View from Castle Rock (Alice Munro; 2006) Short stories that merge fiction and family history by the 2013 Nobel Prize winner for Literature.

Beautiful Losers (Leonard Cohen; 1966) Experimental oddity involving love, sex and Aborigines.

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (Mordechai Richler; 1959) A Montréal Jew's quest to make money.

In the Skin of a Lion (Michael Ondaatje; 1987) Immigrants build Toronto circa 1920.

Economy

Compared to its international brethren, Canada has weathered the global financial crisis pretty well. Yes, the economy dropped into a recession, and Ottawa posted its first fiscal deficit in 2009 after 12 years of surplus, but Canadian banks bounced back, thanks to their tradition of conservative lending. The International Monetary Fund predicted Canada would be the only one of the seven major industrialized democracies to return to surplus by 2015, and the current federal government – led by the Conservatives – is focused on making this a reality, with federal job cuts impacting on departments such as Parks Canada and Aboriginal Affairs, among many others. While the Conservatives say they're removing inefficiencies, with most cuts coming from back-office jobs, the opposition says the cuts are affecting front-line services, and imperiling natural and historic sites.

Oil Between Neighbors

Voltaire may have written off Canada as 'a few acres of snow' back in the mid-18th century, but those 'few acres' have yielded vast amounts of oil, timber and other natural resources, and propelled Canada to an enviable standard of living.

Extracting and developing the resources has, however, come with an ecological price. Oil, in particular, is a conundrum. Northern Alberta's Athabasca Oil Sands (or Tar Sands, depending which side of the ecofence you're on) are the world's second-biggest oil reserves, and they've done an excellent job boosting the economy. They also produce 5% of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions, according to Environment Canada. The pro-industry camp says improvements are being made and, when compared to other oil producers such as Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, the oil sands measure up, especially when human-rights issues and decreased trans-

portation distances are factored in (most of Canada's oil goes to the USA).

The controversial Keystone XL pipeline plays into these themes, and has caused discord between Canada and its southern neighbor. The pipeline will funnel Alberta's crude oil to refineries on the Texas and Louisiana coast. Much of it is already built, but the US State Department, which grants the final permits for building, has been hesitant to give approval for the pipeline's completion, saying Canada could be doing more to curb carbon emissions. The project is also contentious within Canada. Environmentalists and Aboriginal communities located near the pipeline have been vocal about their concerns regarding damage to sacred sites and water contamination that could cause health problems for residents.

Table Talk

The nation's much-cherished but ailing universal health-care system sparks serious table talk. Although no one will admit it, a two-tiered system is in place, and those with deep pockets can access additional, often quicker care in private facilities. Still, a free, portable health-care system that's available to everyone is quite a feat. To many citizens, it's at the very root of what makes Canada great. So are progressive views on same-sex marriage, immigration and marijuana use.

Climate change is another hot topic. A recent poll showed 53% of Canadians believed climate change caused the 2013 floods that put much of Calgary, Alberta underwater. It also revealed Albertans were least likely to believe the flooding came from climate change, while Atlantic Canadians were most likely to believe it.

Politics

In 2006 the Conservative Party took over from the Liberals for the first time in 12 years. Managing the economy (a Conservative tenet) and strengthening social services and health care (policies of the Liberals and left-leaning groups) were among the main issues. Stephen Harper became the new prime minister, but he led Canada's smallest minority government since Confederation. In 2008 he called an early election, hoping to boost the Conservatives' grip. It did, but only 22% of Canadians voted – the lowest in history.

The 2011 election held some surprises. The Conservatives won and picked up enough seats (166) to form a majority. But the big story was the surge of the New Democratic Party, a leftist group that had long been on the fringe, until it upped its seat count from 37 to 103 in 2011. It did so at the expense of the center-left Liberals. Canada's next federal election is scheduled for 2015, and it's pretty much up for grabs.

POPULATION: **34.6 MILLION**

AREA: **9,984,670 SQ KM**

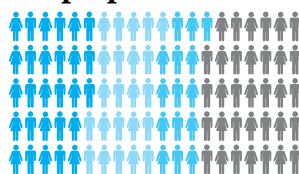
GDP: **US\$1.5 TRILLION**

GDP GROWTH: **1.8%**

INFLATION: **1.5%**

UNEMPLOYMENT: **7.3%**

if Canada were 100 people



28 would be of British Isles origin

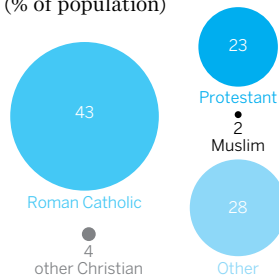
23 would be of French origin

15 would be of other European origin

34 would be of other origin

belief systems

(% of population)



population per sq km

