

Vive la différence!

THE SITUATION IS UNIQUE. With the possible exception of India and Pakistan, nowhere else in the world do you find two countries with at least notionally the same motherland, where each has taken a different path to maturity with some amazing consequences.

In the 1770s, 13 of the British colonies revolted against the motherland to form the United States of America, but 90 years later the issue of slavery produced a civil war that took millions of lives and led to racial segregation that lasted another 100 years. During that century, other wars took place with the ?Indians? and Mexico, with firearms helping secure control over more and more land.

Meanwhile, the U.S. civil war was having a profound impact on the remaining British colonies, and today is credited for four of them agreeing to form the Dominion of Canada in 1867, a confederation that expanded to the west coast in 1871, to Prince Edward Island two years later and lastly to Newfoundland 70 years ago, in 1949.

Unlike that in the U.S., Canada's westward expansion occurred without much opposition from our indigenous residents and only one rebellion of note in 1884 led by Louis Riel.

Perhaps the biggest difference in the two nations is their choice of political leadership. And maybe the biggest irony is that despite their rejection of the British monarchy in favour of a French-style republican system of government, Americans today find themselves being governed by a president who exercises pseudo-monarchical powers through the passage of executive orders that bypass the two houses of Congress.

At no time in the two countries' history have the political differences become more obvious than this week, when the only significant military presence in Ottawa Monday were the normal ceremonial guard, a 21-gun salute and a flypass. Although we witnessed the normal brief speeches by the Governor-General and Prime Minister, most of the afternoon and evening programs on Parliament Hill were various forms of entertainment.

But while our festivities were taking place, south of the border plans were under way for an Independence Day unlike any other, with President Trump ordering up tanks and other armoured vehicles as part of a display of the country's military might.

Most Canadians would find it almost incredible that early in the 20th century there was a mass exodus to the south triggered by the promise of a higher standard of living. Today, in contrast, the net migration is northward, perhaps in part because of our medicare plans and relative lack of violent crime.

One irony is that the country that chose evolution over revolution has been far more open to change.

Over the years, Americans have clung to British units of measurement (feet, yards and miles), traditional paper currency and the penny while Canadians (albeit reluctantly) went metric, replaced paper one-and two-dollar bills with the loonie and toonie and ditched the penny in favour of rounding to five cents.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that at a time when Americans are so divided and being led by a president who thrives on the divisions, Canadians have tended to opt for parties that by comparison with their U.S. counterparts are all far less right-wing.

At a time when the U.S. administration is essentially denying the existence of man-made climate change and boosting coal production, even the Conservative Party is acknowledging a need to reduce greenhouse gases and the only debate is over whether taxation should play any role in future government efforts.

And with elections coming later this year in Canada and next year in the U.S., the promised battles concerning medicare will underscore the political differences. Here, the big question will be whether we should expand medicare to cover prescription drugs

and dental care, while to the South even the Democrats will be hopelessly divided as to whether private insurers should continue to dominate the field, with the Republicans denouncing single-payer medicare as a form of socialism.

With the federal election campaigns already effectively under way, it looks as if Canadian voters will be left having to choose between a 'never ready' Justin Trudeau and an Andrew Scheer who will take his orders from stronger provincial premiers such as Ontario's Doug Ford and Alberta's Jason Kenny.