

OPINION

How do we bridge Canada's divides? MPs should take a trip across the country

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The aurora borealis appears over Great Bear Lake, the world's 8th largest lake in Deline, Northwest Territories.

PAT KANE/REUTERS

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My son had recently published a novel called *The Great Divide*, and, wanting to be a supportive father, I looked for physical divides during the trip to use as photo backdrops to help market his book on social media – the rugged interior of Vancouver Island, the summits of the Coquihalla Highway and Rogers Pass, for example. A passing freight train at Craigellachie, the site of the Last Spike, drove home the pivotal role of the Canadian Pacific Railway in bridging Canada’s geographic divides in the 1800s. Amazing natural backdrops were afforded by the transitions from mountains to plains, plains to Canadian Shield and Lake Superior vistas, then Laurentian Lowlands and on to the upper reaches of the Appalachian range in New Brunswick, culminating in the rocky South Shore of Nova Scotia.

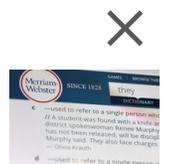
Motoring up Highway 2 to Edmonton and thence east to Lloydminster and Saskatoon, I was struck by the unfolding illustrations of our contemporary political, economic and social divides. I passed billboards that stated, “Support Oil” and “No pipeline, No equalization!” painted on derelict trailers in grain fields. A hand-painted sign at the end of a long Prairie driveway featured a black X through the UN logo. Its incongruity was accentuated by the Black Angus cattle grazing on the other side of the fence.



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I also saw many, many Maple Leaf flags flying proudly on solitary poles or in tandem with the Alberta flag on both private and public properties. The same was true in Saskatchewan, especially in small towns with prominent cenotaphs to Canadian war dead and welcoming signs at the town boundary boasting an NHL hero, such as the tribute to Leafs legend Wendel Clark in Kelvington. This is not Danny Williams's country yet.

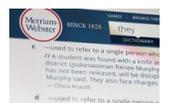
Enormous farm machinery lots in Vegreville, Alta., sat under a Martian yellow-red sky, the result of northern wildfires. An Easterner – for the sake of simplicity, those Canadians living east of Kenora, Ont. – cannot comprehend the size nor the full importance of the energy and agricultural sectors to the three Prairie provinces without experiencing this drive. The massive Altex rail terminal in Lashburn, Sask., handles 88,000 barrels a day and rises out of the Prairie like an industrial Union Station, Toronto's transit hub. Equally impressive are the inland terminals that gather grains and oilseeds for export to customers around the world and rival in size any manufacturing facility in central Canada.

Further east, Highway 17 arcs across Northern Ontario, linking mining and forestry-based communities such as Dryden, Espanola and Sudbury. Secondary roads lead off the 17 to Red Lake, Silver Dollar and Pickle Lake. Pickup trucks outnumber cars three to one. I have crisscrossed Canada several times by air, and although I've never been north of Edmonton, I have seen most of the country south of the 54th parallel. But I had never seen Canada to this degree of proximity and granularity.

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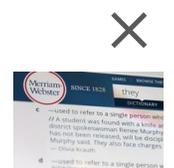
This week, our federal election careened to its conclusion, and Canadians now face a fractured Parliament. A revitalized Bloc mounted a comeback in Quebec, and we read daily of a growing “Wexit” movement on the Prairies. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has expressed regret that Canada is more “polarized, more divided in this election than in 2015. I wonder how or if I could have made sure we were pulling Canadians together?” To be fair to the Prime Minister, none of the party leaders had a unifying theme at the core of their platforms. Perhaps we should look instead to our individual MPs to truly become national legislators, not simply federal representatives for their ridings. How well equipped are MPs to assume this mantle? How intimately do most of them know the country beyond their constituency and province? I suspect we would be disappointed in the answer.

Thus, my modest proposal is that all newly elected MPs take part in a venture organized by an independent organization that would more fully introduce them to Canada. These parliamentary novices would board buses (electric if possible) in St. John’s and, two weeks later, finish their voyage in Ucluelet on Vancouver Island. The journey will meander beyond the major metropolitan areas they are most likely to visit as MPs, to small towns and First Nations communities.

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The Big Nickel, a popular tourist stop at the Dynamic Earth, a Sudbury, Ont. science museum.

FRED LUM

However, today's MPs walk into a House of Commons that devalues collaboration, actively discourages cross-aisle friendships and precludes conversation and active listening. In a world of rabid political talking points, there are few forums for real discussion and dialogue. And even fewer rewards for learning from others.

Put the MPs on buses, mix up the seating arrangement – Liberal with Bloc, Conservative with NDP and Green – have dinner with entrepreneurs, front-line social activists, a fisherman, a Bloc supporter, a canola farmer, a Fort Mac pipe fitter and sawmill worker. Discover how the cannabis-cultivation revolution came to Vancouver Island before legalization and have the conversations so critically required to get to a low-carbon future. Park the partisan talking points at the door and commit to thinking deeply about the country they've chosen to serve by standing for election. Upon return to Ottawa, it will be difficult to despise or belittle an individual with whom you've shared a bus seat or had a drink with in a country music bar in Prince George.

Expensive? Yes, but a negligible price in the context of a federal election that likely cost in excess of \$400-million. Big time commitment? Absolutely, but not unreasonable given that the average MP will work 60-hour weeks under tremendous pressure for the next four years.

In the midst of my 28-day, 9,200-kilometre journey, I had the privilege of attending the 90th birthday celebration of Canada's 17th prime minister, John Turner, in Ottawa. With in-person and video tributes from six former prime ministers and Mr. Trudeau, the stories flowed with fond remembrances, in an atmosphere of evident cross-aisle camaraderie, civility and, yes, friendship. With this positive tone, it's also time to reclaim the perspective of former prime minister Jean Chrétien, who said, "The Rockies belong to us, and I want to say to my friends in Ontario, the Maritimes and Western Canada, the beautiful Saguenay-Lac-Saint Jean is yours too." The long road back begins with our newly elected members of Parliament.

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