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Canadian Beer Ad Appeals to National Pride

By Steven Pearlstein
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TORONTO - Annoyed by the depreciation of their dollar, frustrated that their kids are moving to New York and San Jose, fearful about the arrival of privatized, "American-style" health care and outraged that a Canadian team hasn't won the Stanley Cup in ages, Canadians are finally fighting back.



Actor Jeff Douglas works himself into a patriotic frenzy in the Molson 'Rant' ad. (Toronto National Post)

Their weapon? What else, a beer commercial.

It started in movie theaters, migrated to television and now has become such a cultural phenomenon that the Molson brewery is having it performed live at sporting events. In bars, patrons now demand that the volume be turned up when the ad comes on the TV screen so they can shout the words along with the handsome Nova Scotia actor in the plaid shirt. High school students reportedly have begun reciting it spontaneously in corridors between classes. And when it was performed two weeks ago at the National Hockey League playoff game between the home-town Maple Leafs and the Ottawa Senators, it generated the kind of fist-in-the-air ovation usually reserved for goals scored in sudden-death.

"I'm not a lumberjack or a fur trader. I don't live in an igloo, eat blubber or own a dogsled," says the Canadian Everyman, giving voice to the widespread annoyance here about how little Americans know about Canada. "I have a prime minister, not a president. . . . I believe in peacekeeping, not policing; diversity, not assimilation. I speak English and French, not American."

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...speak English and French, not American."

Following that is a little riff about hats and tuques, couches and chesterfields, and the fact that Canadians pronounce the last letter in the alphabet "zed," not "zee." There is an ironically impassioned defense of the beaver as a "proud and noble animal." And then, as the music of "Pomp and Circumstance" builds to a climax and the red-and-white maple leaf flag fills the background, Joe leans into the microphone and delivers the punch line: "Canada is the second-largest land mass, the first nation of hockey and the best part of North America. My name is Joe and I am Canadian."

"Joe's Rant" has now become daily grist for talk radio and newspaper columns, its vocabulary seeping into the Canadian vernacular. Parodies are sprouting up everywhere. A special "I Am Canadian" Web site ([iam.ca](#)) set up by Molson not only provides unlimited free replays but hosts a well-attended chat room for other ranters to enlarge on what it means to be Canadian.

"The first time I saw it, I was in the movie theater and got chills up my spine," one correspondent wrote to the Molson Web site. "And I still do every time I see it." Even those involved in making the ad are taken aback by the reaction, although they say its too early to gauge any impact on sales of Molson Canadian, the country's most popular brew.

"Its incredible. We've never had anything like we're getting on this; I mean, after all, its a beer commercial," said Paul Thomson, Molson's manager of corporate communications, describing the deluge of calls and requests for tapes. "It just seems to have tapped into a powerful undercurrent of feeling."

Actor Jeff Douglas, 28, has become an overnight celebrity for his performance as Canadian Joe. "When I was shooting it, I thought people would see it, lift their beer and say, 'Yeah, cool,' " Douglas said in one of the dozens of interviews he has done in recent weeks. "I didn't think people would be writing letters to the editor saying I should be enlisted to help with the national unity crisis."

In some respects, what is so remarkable about the reaction to the ad is that it is so un-Canadian. Ever since they fled the American colonies to support their king, English-speaking Canadians have shunned the kind of flag-waving, chest-thumping, We're-The-Best-At-Everything nationalism practiced to the south. Along with gun control and national health care, a studied anti-jingoism has been a central feature of the moral superiority that Canadians feel toward the United States.

But in conducting research for the campaign, the Toronto advertising firm of Bensimon, Byrne D'Arcy discovered that younger Canadians - the target audience for beer ads - have a different view. "When we talked with them, we were surprised to see that not only were they very proud to be Canadians, but they were also more willing to shout it from the rooftops than stereotypical polite, reserved Canadians of earlier generations," said Jack Bensimon, one of the agency's partners.

Over the past week, there has been considerable debate about whether the ad is simply a lively expression of Canadian national pride or a not-so-subtle appeal to anti-Americanism. In reality, there may be very little difference between the two. Canadians and Americans are alike in so many ways, and the United States is such a looming presence in Canadian life, that virtually the only way Canadians have to define their identity is to highlight whatever is un-American about themselves.

"What the ad reflects is the narcissism of small differences," said Michael Adams, a Toronto pollster whose book on Canadian culture was titled, "Sex in the Snow." "It demonstrates the abiding ambivalence we have to our big brother across the border."

In this case, making a little anti-American mischief comes at very little cost - Molson is only running the ad in Canada, so few Americans will see it. But that didn't stop Jeffrey Simpson, the sharp-tongued political columnist for Toronto's Globe & Mail newspaper, from asking Canadians how much good humor they would have if Budweiser tried to sell beer in the United States by stirring up anti-Canadian sentiments.

"Then again," sighed Simpson, "it would never even occur to an American ad agency to bother."

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