

COMMENTARY

Gander Proved the Friendship. Chrétien Told the Truth.

Twenty-five years after Gander opened its doors on 9/11, Jean Chrétien offered a reminder about Canada–U.S. friendship: generosity is not weakness, and real friends tell each other the truth.

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Illustration: Nasty Canuck / AI-assisted.

Twenty-five years after Gander opened its doors to thousands of stranded travellers, Jean Chrétien used the anniversary to make a harder point: friendship is not obedience, and honesty is part of respect.

Jean Chrétien could have stopped at the applause line. Standing in Gander on the 25th anniversary of the September 11 attacks, the former prime minister reminded his American friends that Canada is generous, tolerant and kind — and warned them not to mistake any of those qualities for weakness. Canada helps its friends when they need it, he said, but “we bow to no one.”

That was the line built for headlines. But Chrétien kept going: “I say that not in anger, but as one friend to another. Friends need to be honest with each other.” In a few sentences, what could have become another Canada-versus-America speech turned into something more useful: an argument about what friendship actually requires.

Gander had already proved its side of the friendship

There are few places in Canada better qualified to deliver that message than Gander.

On September 11, 2001, after the United States closed its airspace, 38 aircraft carrying more than 6,500 passengers and crew were diverted there. A community of roughly 10,000 suddenly had thousands of strangers on its doorstep. Schools, churches and community spaces became shelters. Residents found beds, meals, medicine and transportation, opened their homes, and helped people who had arrived frightened and exhausted into a world that had changed while they were still in the air.

Gander did not stop to calculate what was in it for them. Thousands of unexpected guests were stranded, and the community responded.

That is why Chrétien’s speech worked where it did. He was not lecturing Americans from a partisan rally. He was speaking in a town whose people had already demonstrated what friendship looks like **when it is actually needed.**

Before this year’s ceremony, the Town of Gander asked people to keep the focus on the lives lost, those forever affected and the humanity shown in the days that followed — not on the current political quarrel.

That setting gave Chrétien something politicians rarely get handed for free: moral credibility.

Canada did more than offer a spare bed

The relationship did not end when the last diverted aircraft left Newfoundland. Canada joined the mission in Afghanistan after the attacks. More than 40,000 Canadian Armed Forces members served there; 158 died, along with seven Canadian civilians. Thousands were also injured, physically or psychologically.

Whatever Canadians think today about that war, those sacrifices are part of the record. So is the larger relationship. Canada and the United States share an enormous border, deeply integrated economies, defence partnerships, families, communities, culture and history. We have disagreed before and will disagree again, but when Americans were attacked in 2001, Canadians showed up.

Gander did it with gymnasiums, kitchens and spare bedrooms. Canadian soldiers later did it in Afghanistan. Canada does not have to invent a record of friendship with the United States. It has one.

A friend is not a subordinate.

Kindness is not weakness

One of the strongest parts of Chrétien's argument was that he did not try to redefine Canada by making us louder, harder or more aggressive. He defended the qualities Canadians are sometimes told make us soft.

Canada is open. We welcome people. We generally try to be tolerant, and we take some pride in helping those who need it. Chrétien's point was that none of that makes a country weak. Building and sustaining a country across this geography and climate takes toughness. So does absorbing people from around the world and trying to make them part of the country rather than leaving them permanently outside it. Caring about vulnerable people does not mean a society lacks a spine.

Those qualities can be expressions of confidence. That distinction matters at a time when strength is too often confused with belligerence. Countries do not prove their sovereignty by being perpetually angry, and Canadians do not need to become hostile toward Americans to insist that Canada is a sovereign country whose interests and choices deserve respect.

Kindness is not submission, and friendship is not obedience.

Friends are allowed to say no

Canada and the United States are in a difficult period. Trade disputes have escalated, market access has become less predictable, and rhetoric around Canadian sovereignty has crossed lines that would have sounded absurdly unserious not long ago.

There are plenty of bad ways Canada could respond. We could convince ourselves that every American is the enemy, mistake reflexive retaliation for strategy, turn patriotism into permanent grievance, or pretend nothing has really changed because acknowledging the problem feels uncomfortable.

Chrétien offered a better option: tell the truth.

Friends can disagree about trade, defence, procurement, borders, foreign policy and any number of other things without ceasing to be friends. But a friendship that requires one side to stay quiet whenever the other behaves badly is not much of a friendship. The same principle works between people: the friend who tells you something you need to hear, knowing you may not enjoy it, may be doing you the larger favour.

Chrétien put it in distinctly Newfoundland terms. People there will give you the shirt off their backs, he said, but they will also respect you enough to tell you the truth.

That may be the most Canadian idea in the whole speech.

The hug mattered

There was a small moment after Chrétien finished. U.S. Ambassador Pete Hoekstra stood up and embraced him.

One hug is not a diplomatic breakthrough, and we should not pretend otherwise. But symbolically, it fit the speech remarkably well. Chrétien had just delivered a blunt defence of Canadian sovereignty, rejected intimidation and told Americans that friendship sometimes means hearing something uncomfortable. Then the American ambassador hugged him.

Nobody surrendered. Nobody had to.

That is what healthy relationships are supposed to survive.

Gander already showed us how this works

The people of Gander did not become less Canadian when they opened their doors to Americans and travellers from around the world in 2001. They became one of the clearest expressions of Canada imaginable. Their generosity did not diminish them; it defined them.

Twenty-five years later, Chrétien stood in that same community and supplied the other half of the idea. Canada can help a friend without belonging to that friend, cooperate without surrendering judgment, disagree without becoming an enemy, and stand its ground without abandoning decency.

It can also tell a friend the truth without speaking in anger.

Friendship is not demonstrated only when somebody needs a bed. Sometimes it is demonstrated when somebody needs to hear something difficult.

Gander proved the friendship 25 years ago. Chrétien told the truth about what that friendship should require today.

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