Kinder, Gentler Canada
Peter Dreier and Elaine Bernard

If President Bill Clinton wants to see how activist government can solve social problems with strong public support, he should take a few days to visit Canada. With Toronto’s World Series victory, the nationwide referendum on constitutional reform (including the status of Quebec), and the controversy over the North American Free Trade Agreement, Canada lately has been in the American news more than at any time in recent memory. But despite all this attention, there’s a Canada few Americans know about—a nation whose citizens are better off than their American counterparts in many ways: safer cities, less poverty, fewer homeless, lower infant mortality, and healthier workplaces.

Clinton has pledged to introduce, during the first 100 days, comprehensive health care reform. Thanks to the recent national debate over our country’s health care crisis, many Americans now know that Canada does a better job of providing decent health care for all its citizens at a reasonable cost. The U.S. spends more on health expenditures—12.4 percent of its GNP and $2,566 per capita—than any country in the world, but 37 million people are without insurance. Canada spends 9 percent of GNP and $1,735 per capita and provides coverage for all residents, financed by a single-payer system that eliminates much bureaucratic waste and controls costs. Many American health care experts, political candidates, and public officials look longingly at the “Canadian model.”

But there are other features of Canadian society from which Americans might draw lessons for improving social and economic conditions at home. Unfortunately, Canada’s successful housing programs, labor laws, environmental and workplace safety regulations, urban planning practices, social welfare policies, women’s rights laws, and mass transit system—which are superior to those in the U.S.—rarely make the American news. How many Americans realize, for example, that Canada provides its citizens with a shorter worktime, greater employment security, and a broader social safety net than the United States?

In world affairs and in economic relations, Canada has long been the “junior partner” of the United States. As a result, Americans have often not taken Canada very seriously. Some even resented the Toronto Blue Jays’ World Series victory. These Americans have long viewed Canada as a second-rate country, so losing to a Canadian team (even if no players are actually Canadians) hurts their national pride, already wounded by an economic recession and decline in global power. The Canadians’ rejection of the nationwide referendum designed to bind Quebec with the rest of the country allowed American editorialists to poke fun at the country’s chronic “identity crisis” and seemingly reaffirmed American superiority.

That attitude is a mistake that blinds
... And They Won the World Series, Too

- 20.4 percent of American children live in poverty, compared with 9.3 percent of Canadian children.
- 10.9 percent of Americans over 65 live in poverty, compared with 2.2 percent of Canadians.
- The U.S. infant mortality rate of 10 deaths per 1,000 live births is highest of the 19 major industrial countries; Canada's rate is 7 deaths per 1,000 live births.
- Canada ranks seventh in life expectancy (77 years); the U.S. ranks fifteenth (75.9 years).
- Canada is the only major country without a national maternity leave policy. Canadian women receive 17 to 18 weeks of paid maternity leave.
- In the U.S., only 33 percent of unemployed workers receive unemployment insurance benefits, which provide up to 64 percent of weekly wages for a maximum of $291 a week up to 26 weeks. (This time limit was recently temporarily increased because of high unemployment.) In Canada, 59 percent of unemployed workers get benefits, for up to 50 weeks, paying up to 60 percent of their former pay levels to a maximum of $396 a week.
- The U.S. ranks first in children's deaths due to homicide: 3.7 out of 1,000 American children (aged 1 to 19) are killed by handguns. The comparable figure for Canada is 8 and 0.3 million.
- The U.S. ranks last in children's deaths due to homicide: 3.7 out of 1,000 American children (aged 1 to 19), compared with 1.1 out of 1,000 Canadian.
- During the late 1980s, the U.S. produced more hazardous waste—110,000 tons per 100,000 people—than any other country. Canada ranked second, but with only 12,500 tons per 100,000 people.
- The U.S. spends 4.77 percent of its GDP in public dollars on education, compared with 6.53 percent in Canada.
- When 14-year-olds in 17 countries were given a science test, the U.S. ranked fifteenth. Canada ranked fourth.
- In 1991, corporate CEOs in the U.S. (in firms with sales over $250 million) received an average remuneration of $747,500, 25 times the average pay of manufacturing employees. Their counterparts in Canada received $407,600, or 12 times the pay of manufacturing workers.
- American workers get 10.8 paid vacation days per year—last among the 19 major industrial nations; although Canadians rank next to last, they get 14.7.
influence in Canadian politics. For example, Canada’s universal, single-payer health care program was first developed by the NDP provincial government of Saskatchewan, where its success catalyzed a national debate and adoption of the program across Canada. When Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal Party needed NDP support to hold power in Ottawa, the NDP used its bargaining power to pass a mixed-income nonprofit housing program that has been very successful. The NDP currently governs Ontario (the largest province) as well as British Columbia and Saskatchewan, together representing a majority of the Canadian population.

The parliamentary system makes it easier for third, or minority, parties to emerge. But the concentration in such a system means that minority opposition parties have very little real power. Yet the NDP—through a combination of winning power at the provincial level, occasionally holding the balance of power, and providing a consistent, organized alternative voice at the national level—has had a lasting progressive influence on Canadian politics.

An Active Labor Movement. The Canadian labor movement is stronger, more progressive, and more politically active than its American counterpart. Unions today represent about 38 percent of Canada’s work force, compared with less than 16 percent in the United States. The Canadian labor movement was a cofounder of the NDP and plays a major role in formulating party policy; many labor activists have been elected to party offices and run as NDP candidates in local, provincial, and federal elections. Because most workplace-related laws, and much social legislation, is a provincial responsibility, and because the NDP has held power in several provinces, labor has played a major role in shaping social and economic conditions. The NDP has promoted a higher minimum wage, labor law reform, and pay equity legislation. Canada has no anti-union “right-to-work” laws; prohibits permanent replacement workers (strikebreakers); and has quicker, fairer recognition procedures for unions and strong sanctions against employer interference in union organizing.

Moreover, labor in Canada has a broader political vision than its American counterpart. Its “social unionism” perspective—incorporating the broad concerns of working people on the job and as citizens of the larger society—brings labor into alliances with feminists, environmentalists, housing activists, the peace movement, and other progressive forces. As a result, labor is not easily relegated to the charge of representing a “special interest group.”

Just as Canada overcame the political obstacles to social and economic reform, so can the United States. After all, the commonalities between the U.S. and Canada are much greater than their differences. Each nation is the other’s largest trading partner. Both are now coping with a new global economy and the end of the Cold War—a major factor in the recently signed North American Free Trade Agreement.

Since 1984 Canada has had a conservative national government in Ottawa, headed by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, that has sought to roll back social and economic progress in much the same fashion that the Reagan/Bush and Thatcher administrations sought. But Mulroney has been much less successful than his role models in Washington and London because Canadians like their “social contract” with government and express their views through their political organizations.

Canada is not a social utopia. But it has managed to carve out a set of social and economic policies that, compared with the U.S., is more humane, progressive, and efficient. As the two countries are drawn closer together—in part by the recent free trade agreement—Americans should make sure that on social policy, the U.S. becomes more like Canada, and not the other way around.