

POLITICALLY SPEAKING  
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### ***The Toronto Pride Parade and the Calgary Stampede – Proudly Canadian.***

What a fantastic country we live in!

In the space of one week, I had the great privilege of experiencing two of Canada's iconic - wildly different, yet somehow very much alike – events: Toronto's Pride Parade and the Calgary Stampede. And doing so in such a short time frame made the contrasts (of which there are most certainly quite a few) and the similarities (the fact of which might surprise quite a few people) that much more vivid. Participating in both made me even more proud of being Canadian than I was before - and that's saying something.

The histories of the two events are very different. They began for very different reasons, under very different circumstances, in very different eras. Toronto's Pride Parade started fairly recently, as a protest, a challenge to the status quo and to societal assumptions. The Calgary Stampede started 100 years ago, by a traveling showman putting on a spectacle based on a rather inauthentic myth of cowboy culture—truth be told, one which really didn't have much to do with Calgary, even in 1912.

They have very different elements, aspects and messages, and some will attach partisan politics or certain sets of societal views to each. Certainly, in each one, you will find a variety of views, of levels of tolerance for differences of opinion, and even what might constitute 'right' or 'wrong'. Both have also endured their share of criticism—in Toronto, from some members of the religious right or others who are homophobic; in Calgary, from animal rights activists and history purists. Both, however, have become iconic traditions in their respective cities, traditions which their homes now celebrate as part of their culture, as part of their identity—and each of which contributes to our national identity.

To someone seeing either event for the first time, they certainly look different. In Toronto, partly because of the incredible diversity in the city to start with, and partly because of the people the Pride Parade attracts from out of town, the crowd comprises people of every shape, size, colour, ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion imaginable. In Calgary, although over the years this has been changing, the majority of people involved with and attending Stampede still do look a lot alike. It remains, not to put too fine a point on it, pretty white, even with the area's aboriginal tribes who proudly participate but whose numbers are relatively small. The histories, and the communities the two events have evolved in, are very different. There is no shortage of contrasts between the western cowboy and LGBT cultures, and there is no question that the two events are very, very different in look and feel. But they also have some wonderful similarities, which speak, at least to me, of a shared “Canadianism”.

Some examples?

They are both such wildly popular celebrations that each city simply shuts down various streets and pedestrians take over, with people oozing pride of place and an infectious enthusiasm for celebrating who they are.

Cowboy hats, boots and chaps are in evidence at both, although the chaps in Toronto tend to be a little more revealing than those in Calgary, and don't show a lot of actual horse-riding wear and tear. The hats in Toronto tend to have a little more variety than the white Smithbilt ones which cover the heads of large numbers of Calgarians. Indeed, while on the topic of the western wear theme, I dare say that I saw almost as many rhinestones, and probably more studs, in Toronto than Calgary.

There are lots of costumes at both. Both cities erupt in colour, including the materials which the local Albertan aboriginal groups use both for themselves and their horses, which are stunningly colourful and beautiful. For sure, there are more white hats and blue jeans in the one city, contrasted with an overall scarcity of clothing altogether in the other, but people in both places love to wear their fun.

There is a great deal of music, with bands playing all over, and with dancing erupting in bars, at events, and in the streets all over town. Although the artists and types of music may differ, there is a surprising amount of overlap, and regardless of who or what, anything with a beat gets people in both cities tapping feet and dancing. There is no shortage of drinking and engaging in the pursuit of sexual fun. The shouting and singing in Toronto aren't quite as sacred, or as uniform, as the "Ya Hoo" or "Yee Haw" of Calgary Stampede, but in both places people love sharing their enthusiasm with others—loudly.

Fundamentally, however, what I love about both events is that they have turned two things that started from very different beginnings—on the one hand as a protest, on the other as a bit of theatre—into huge celebratory traditions, far beyond anything their founders expected. In each case they have evolved, addressing some concerns, but in other cases proudly and firmly pushing aside complaints in order to carry on. Most importantly, from my perspective, these two huge celebrations of life and community and spirit have, together, become fundamental parts of my identity and my pride as a Canadian.