

Editorial Introduction: The Enduring Relevance of *Lament for a Nation*

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On February 5, 1963, John Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservative government was defeated in the Canadian House of Commons. The New Democratic Party voted with the Liberal Party to trigger an election over the issue of American nuclear-armed Bomarc missiles on Canadian soil. The Liberal Party would go on to win a plurality of seats in the election, ultimately giving Lester B. Pearson a minority government, and the missiles a home in Canada.

In 1965, George Grant published *Lament for a Nation*, an attack on the political, media, and corporate elite that conspired to defeat Diefenbaker. This attack, moreover, was undergirded by a philosophical critique of modernity and the power of its universalizing and homogenising impulses to destroy particular cultures. "The confused strivings of politicians, businessmen, and civil servants cannot alone account for Canada's collapse. This stems from the very character of the modern era" (Grant 2005/1965, p. 52).

On January 2, 1988, Canada and the United States signed the CUSFTA free trade agreement (later to become NAFTA with the addition of Mexico in 1993), further cementing what Grant had called Canada's status as a "branch plant of American capitalism" (Grant 2005/1965, p. 9). "Canada has ceased to be a nation," Grant wrote, "but its formal political existence will not end quickly. Our social and economic blending into the empire will continue apace, but political union will probably be delayed" (Grant 2005/1965, p. 85).

On January 7, 2025, US president-elect Donald Trump answered a reporter's question with the statement that he planned to use "economic force" to annex Canada (Stavis-Gridneff 2025).

On February 3, 2025, in a phone call with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, President Trump stated that he wanted to revisit the 1908 treaty that settled the border between the two sovereign states. Commenting on the phone call after the fact, Trudeau stated publicly that the official reason for the sudden tariffs on Canadian goods was "completely bogus." He continued: "What [Trump] wants is to see a total collapse of the Canadian economy, because that'll make it easier to annex us" (Stavis-Gridneff 2025).

As of June 29, 2025—approaching Canada Day—Donald Trump persists in claiming that Canada should be the 51st state.¹ The seemingly unprompted antagonism and threats of annexation from the Trump administration have continued for months, prompting the Canadian rallying cry "Elbows up" and driving voters back to a beleaguered Liberal Party that was on the brink of (arguably well-deserved) electoral collapse before and until Trump's inauguration.

In his introduction to the 40th anniversary edition of *Lament for a Nation*, Andrew Potter described it as Grant's "most enduring and important book" (Grant 2005/1965, p. ix). Readers may quibble with the "most important" designation (personally, I might give that designation to *English-Speaking Justice*), but few would deny the way in which it speaks to perennial Canadian concerns. A lot has changed since Grant published *Lament for a Nation* 60 years ago, but the uncertainty of Canada's survival as a nation remains. The social, cultural, and economic "blending into the empire" (Grant 2005/1965, p. 85) has continued as Grant foresaw, as do fears about the overt political annexation hinted at in *Lament*.²

Although most Canadians have expressed a strong aversion to becoming the 51st state, a non-trivial number *would* like to join the USA if guaranteed citizenship and full conversion of their assets into US dollars.³ This may confirm two of Grant's suspicions about Canadian political life. First, as he wrote in *Lament for a Nation*, "nothing essential distinguishes Canadians from Americans" (Grant 2005/1965, p. 53). One notices how even many ardent defenders of Canadian sovereignty rely on the modern moral language of rights, values, and efficiency.⁴ Grant argued that it was precisely this universalizing and homogenizing modern language that flattened difference and eliminated appeals to the transcendent, rendering a meaningfully distinct Canada all but impossible. Could it be that the 30% of Canadians who want formal political union with America are the most honest and intellectually consistent among us? Second, much of the support for continental political union comes from those who identify with right-wing political parties.⁵ Grant, though a certain type of conservative, did not think that modern conservative parties of the "blue tory" mould would offer much resistance to absorption into the American empire. He was an outspoken opponent of the CUSFTA free trade agreement entered into by Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government in 1988 (Grant 2009/1988). Three months before his death in 1988, he referred to Mulroney's Progressive Conservative party as "the Republican Party North" (Grant 1996, p. 388). In *Lament for a Nation* itself, he wrote that "[t]he impossibility of conservatism in our epoch is seen in the fact that those who adopt that title can be no more than the defenders of whatever structure of power is at any moment necessary to technological change" (Grant 2005/1965, p. 66).

As a final consideration of *Lament for a Nation*'s relevance in 2025, I quote a footnote to the passage from which the preceding quote is taken:

The next wave of American "conservatism" is not likely to base its appeal on such unsuccessful slogans as the Constitution and free enterprise. Its leader will not be a gentleman who truly cares about his country's past. It will concentrate directly on such questions as "order in the streets" which are likely to become crucial in the years ahead. The battle will be between democratic tyrants and the authoritarians of the right (Grant 2005/1965, p. 66n23).

One must be careful when making political predictions—or in this case, treating the above statement as a prediction of our current political moment—but this cannot be taken as anything but the analysis of a discerning critic of the political outworkings of our technological ontology. Written even before the Reagan-Thatcher neoliberal revolution that would change the political programmes of both the centre-left and centre-right, Grant worried that the growing technological imperative would eventually compel even so-called conservative movements to embrace a law-and-order authoritarianism. Only those most blinded by partisan commitments will not see something like that in today's populist right.

The prescience of Grant's political analysis was a function of his perception of the fate towards which our metaphysical assumptions impel us. Many of the philosophical undercurrents he examined in 1965 persist well into the 2020s. Technology and industrial mass society continue to fight against human excellence and dignity. One can only imagine what Grant would make of the growing reliance on generative-AI to replace human thought and artistic creativity. Modern men continue to think of themselves as essentially free by nature, living in a natural world that exists solely to be controlled and manipulated according to our endless willing. "Such a society cannot take seriously the conception of an eternal order by which hu-

man actions are measured and defined” (Grant 2005/1965, p. 71). The world those words described in 1965 is still very much with us.

For these reasons, 60 years after its publication, *Lament for a Nation* remains a classic of Canadian political thought. The political phenomena that inspired Grant to write it—in anger, he later admitted (Grant 1996, p. 243)—have not gone away, as the brief recounting above makes clear. Beyond that, he offers a unique perspective on modernity—that is, from the borderlands of the empire that more fully than any other instantiates modern principles.

The essays in this special issue of *Cosmos + Taxis* reflect on the various lessons of or arguments put forth in *Lament for a Nation*. Some focus on the political questions Grant raised in 1965 (nationalism, the survival of Canada, the future of conservatism and right-wing politics), some are more overtly philosophical in orientation, reflecting on the ontological concerns Grant thought were raised by the 1963 Bomarc missile crisis, and some seek to shed light on Grant’s philosophical influences, especially Plato and the French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil. The articles by Tyler Chamberlain and Ryan Alexander McKinnell present a dialogue regarding Grant’s political wisdom (or possible lack thereof). This special issue ends, fittingly, with a reprint of a short article by Grant’s friend and biographer William Christian that was written to coincide with Grant’s funeral on September 29, 1988. In addition to providing a touching account of the person George Grant, it helpfully contextualizes *Lament For a Nation* within Grant’s broader philosophical concerns. Despite their different approaches, subject matters, and evaluations of Grant’s thought, all articles in this issue share the assumption that the themes in *Lament for a Nation* remain relevant to Canadian political and philosophical life even after 60 years. Though any piece of scholarship should be judged on the basis of its rigour, logical consistency, and interpretation of relevant texts, perhaps these articles can also be judged by whether and how much they inspire the reader to pick up *Lament for a Nation* for herself.

One of the pleasures of working on collections of essays is having the opportunity to read the essays as they are drafted and finalized. This project was no different, and I would like to close by thanking all contributors for their stimulating articles. Additionally, without early comments by Ryan Alexander McKinnell and Leslie Marsh, the idea for this special issue would not have taken shape. Thanks to all of the above for your roles in putting together this special journal issue to commemorate 60 years of George Grant’s *Lament for a Nation*.

NOTES

- 1 Interview on *Sunday Morning Futures with Maria Bartiromo*, Fox News Network, June 29, 2025. <https://youtu.be/YdqKZDJQoDw?si=t8aXhPfpBtZEvCfG>.
- 2 There are differences of opinion on the question of how seriously Trump and his inner circle “mean” the language of annexation, but it is nevertheless true that Justin Trudeau thought it was serious enough to publicly accuse Trump of threatening annexation, a direct political threat Canada has not faced from the USA for decades but that has loomed over Canada’s head for centuries. See David Orchard (1993).
- 3 These numbers are from a poll conducted by Ipsos in January 2025. The summary of results can be found on the Ipsos website here: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/43-percent-canadians-would-vote-be-american-if-citizenship-and-conversion-assets-usd-guaranteed>.
- 4 Perhaps the clearest example of this is Prime Minister Mark Carney’s 2021 book *Values: Building a Better World for All*. Carney, by all accounts a decent man with a humane political vision, nevertheless has little recourse to any moral language but the modern. He does make use of an Aristotelian-inspired framework of virtues as habits, but at the end of the day he cashes out his moral ontology in the language of our values. The Grantian question is whether such modern language can truly preserve a distinct Canadian political identity.

- 5 A January 2025 survey conducted by Angus Reid found that while 10% of all Canadians favour joining the USA, 20% of those who voted for the Conservative Party of Canada supported joining. The results can be accessed at <https://angusreid.org/canada-51st-state-trump/>.

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