



Eventually every cast member of Sesame Street sang, “One of these things is not like the others, one of these things just doesn't belong ...” And for the last month or so it's been my theme song too.

The myriad differences between The United States and Canada, most small, some huge, culminate in an odd sort of “culture shock” that resonates throughout the day. And with each noted difference ... a mini-Twilight Zone episode.

At first glance the usual scattered change on my bedside table; nickels, dimes, and pennies, look like the loose coins that have always cluttered the nightstand. But look closer ... on the penny the image of a dead president has been replaced by a living queen. We've slipped into another dimension, an alternative universe. That's the signpost up ahead your next stop, the Canadian Zone. But unlike the unease simmering under each Rod Serling story, the differences here are ... pleasant.

Oh sure we've been tripped up by the metric system a few times. What initially looked like a great price per pound for salami was actually the price for 100 grams. We buy gasoline by the liter, highway distances are in kilometers, and a comfortable temperature is 20 degrees ... Celsius. All these daily conversions require “doing arithmetic in your head” skills that I haven't exercised since the third grade. I should have it all figured out by the time my funeral starts.

The larger differences are really remarkable.

Our health care costs have gone from eleven hundred dollars a month to eighteen hundred dollars ... per year.

When our son was born my wife's maternity leave was 12 weeks without pay. But at least she had a job to go back to. My wife's Canadian cousin recently had a baby. Her maternity leave is for 52 weeks at 75% of her salary. And her employer “tops off” her compensation so she receives 100% of her salary during her maternity leave.

There's employment up here instead of unemployment down there. The Canadian unemployment figure this summer was 7.2%. In the U.S. the figure reported is 9.1%. But ... if you use the same methods the rest of the industrialized nations use to determine real unemployment numbers, for the U.S. you get 16 to 22%. Chocolate rations are up using U.S. methodology.

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