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Warming up a cold front

Among the many putdowns of this vast and beautiful country, Al Capone once said "I don't even know what street Canada is on." When they said Canada, fluted Marilyn Monroe, I thought it was up in the mountains somewhere. A country so enormous (second largest in the world) that someone once said it's going to be a great place when they finish unpacking it, Canada is perpetually overshadowed by its hyperactive, fully loaded, Southern Neighbor with whom it shares the longest unguarded border in the world.

Traveling up north to Toronto from the hurly-burly of Washington DC, New York and Boston, you can feel the pace drop. Canadians mercifully lack the edginess of their southern cousins, although it's often kidded that their sang froid is derived from the cold front, their best known export to the U.S alongside ice hockey players. But it's going to change, they promise, and it could well be at the expense of their hot-headed cousins down south.

Although Toronto, Canada's largest city and eastern entrepot, is busier than many American gateways, it is more relaxed. It is arguably the most multicultural city in the world. A staggering 52 per cent of Toronto's population is foreign-born, compared to only 36 per cent in New York City. It is home to half a million people of Indian origin, the biggest desi settlement abroad outside Greater London.

Canada is also as provincial as it is federated, so you frequently have the spectacle of Canadian nationalism being buffeted by competitive regionalism, a road we are also starting to go down in India. Which is why Ontario recently hauled a group of hacks all the way from India to promote the province as an investment destination and an exporter, even as British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec, not to speak of Ottawa, are making their own pitch.

So how and why does Ontario hope to get any traction when Canada invites little attention and foreign delegations are barreling in and out of India? Because, says, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty – and I'm paraphrasing him here -- "we may not be the fastest or the loudest, but we are the smartest and most open." Besides it's diversity, Ontario boasts of the world's most educated workforce, with 56 per cent of the working population having a post-secondary degree, more than Japan and the U.S.

Canadians are quite bashful, which is why few people know that they invented insulin, pacemaker, Imax, and Blackberry, among other things. For the last two years, Ontario has edged out Michigan as the world's auto central, making more automobiles than the neighboring American state. Alexander Graham Bell was a native son, a legacy that's probably helped Canada become among the most wired country on earth despite its vastness.

Premier McGuinty, who uniquely also holds the post of Minister for Research and Innovation, will visit India in January to make the pitch. But guess what, he might run smack-bang into a certain Arnold Schwarzenegger of California, visiting with pretty much the same agenda*. And although McGuinty is not lacking in either looks or heft -- degrees in law and science to boot -- expect the governorator to suck the air out of the room.

Which is a pity because there's a good reason why Ontario/Canada is walking the India talk. It does not want an economy that's tied at the hip to the United States. As someone said, God bless America, but God help Canada put up with them. Yeah, we are getting to know that feeling too. Good reasons why we should be paying as much attention to Ontario as California.

* The Governorator broke his leg and had to defer his visit to India, giving McGuinty a free run.
