

## **Celebrity matters, not the monarchy**

By Andrew Cohen, Citizen Special July 2, 2011

William and Catherine are in Canada and the media are in full howl. Every cliché is mobilized, every adjective enlisted. The coverage is somewhere between breathless and priceless.

The television networks offer blanket coverage, the newspapers put out special sections, the Internet is abuzz. The royal juggernaut is now cresting like the Red River in May.

Maclean's, the monarchy's leading defender, has published a 98-page special commemorative edition. Amid the deluge of detail, it sends a Valentine to the Royal Couple from John Fraser, the esteemed author and editor.

Fraser, my old friend and former colleague, is rhapsodic about the prospect of King William and Queen Catherine of Canada ("God willing, the people willing, history willing"). He laments the erosion of the monarchy in Canada over the last quarter century and is relieved the Conservatives are trying to restore it.

The royal tour, he predicts, will bring "immense joy" to monarchists and "vituperation and gnashing of teeth for republicans who have predicted the inevitability of the Republic of Canada." Oh, dear.

This is Fraser's antidote to the reign of ridicule heaped upon the monarchy. He laments how the media and politicians in our peaceable kingdom have "minimized and denigrated" the sovereign. Oh, my.

Fraser can rest easy. In our unconscious country, there is scarcely a discouraging word today about the royal couple or the institution they represent. In fact, there is no conversation at all.

Let's understand something; an adult discussion about the future of the monarchy in Canada isn't about William and Kate, any more than it's about Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, or Charles and Camilla, or Andrew and Sarah.

It isn't *lèse majesté*. Or impolite. Or anti-British. You can love Britain, its glorious history, and its luminaries such as the great Winston Churchill, and still question the monarchy.

For their part, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are sensational. They are elegant, poised and modern. They seem without ego or airs.

We can say the same of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. They are exemplars of duty. Let there be no doubt: as queens go, she is a very good queen.

They have served their country and its venerable institution well. But the point is that ultimately it's their country and their institution. Not ours.

Monarchy matters? So says Maclean's. In Canada, that's not so, not really, which is why the royalists tremble whenever critics challenge the institution. No wonder they celebrate a recent poll that finds 52 per cent of Canadians "now disagree" with the well-worn proposal that when the Queen abdicates or dies, Canada should cut its ties with Britain.

Wow, 52 per cent! Not three-fifths, two-thirds or three-quarters of Canadians. A bare majority! Yet even that inconclusive poll was presented in a news story as proof of Canadians "basking in a youthful romance" with the monarchy. This isn't exactly critical reporting that Fraser decries. It's not even analytical.

In Canada, it isn't the monarchy that matters. It's celebrity. And William and Kate are celebrities, pure and simple. They are the new thing, their own emblem and their own brand. Good for them.

The monarchy is something else. Canadians don't dislike the idea of the sovereign; it's more that they find the monarchy irrelevant to their lives. The Queen lives in London and has spent an infinitesimal period of her illustrious reign here. When Pierre Trudeau said that he'd rather go skiing than discuss the Queen, he was where Canadians were.

In Quebec, by contrast, there is hostility. Royal visits there evoke an enduring distaste for the monarchy, which undermines our continuing effort to establish a sense of common purpose and shared ambitions among Canadians. Quebec's skepticism may be odd two centuries after the Conquest, but the past still matters there, much as English Canada denies it.

Fundamentally, we remain a neocolonial country, afraid to take the next step in creating a fully autonomous state. It's curious that the conservatives who fervently decry "the nanny state" so fervently embrace "the mommy state."

That's a byword for an adolescent society so dependent on a maternal (or paternal figure) that it cannot bring itself to cut the apron strings. We cannot even talk about it. It's easier to keep the monarchy, a default position, rather than re-imagine ourselves as a diverse, modern people.

Anathema as this would be to monarchists, abolishing the monarchy would be consistent with our affirmation of identity over the last 144 years.

In 1909, we established the Department of External Affairs. In 1917, we took Vimy Ridge. In 1919, we represented ourselves at the Versailles Conference. In 1931, we won full control over our foreign relations.

In 1947, we established Canadian citizenship. In 1949, we made the Supreme Court of Canada, finally, supreme in more than name. In 1965, we adopted a flag. In 1967, we established the Order of Canada, our own system of honours.

And in 1982, in our greatest act of nation-building, we patriated the British North America Act and entrenched a Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

When we adopted the new flag and brought home the BNA Act, in particular, the Little Canadians among us resisted. Indeed, had Pierre Trudeau not freed our founding document from British trusteeship, it would still be in London.

Now, in a new century, in a country of new immigrants and old skeptics, Canadians should not shrink from continuing, if not completing, their journey to independence. In making the

governor general Canada's head of state, we will create a worthy institution inspired by Britain, but made in Canada.

Oh, how the nervous-nellies and shiver-sisters and the royalists will shriek, as they always do. And how, once again, they will be on the wrong side of history.

Andrew Cohen, founding president of the Historica-Dominion Institute, is a professor of journalism and international affairs at Carleton University.

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