

Allan Fotheringham: Still colonials after all these years

December 11, 2008

How can an entire country miss the issue? In the mess that was Ottawa last week, reporters were running in circles, heavyweight broadcasters in exhaustion were mangling their diction, newscasts were stretched to hours instead of minutes. All because a desperate prime minister, after more than two hours of arguing, got permission to kill Parliament (and that is the proper word) for two months, from a person whose only qualifications for holding the office are being female and speaking French.

The finest newspaper in the world, *The New York Times*, had its Ottawa correspondent begin his second paragraph on the crisis with the explanation that Stephen Harper "acted after getting the approval of Governor-General Michaëlle Jean, who represents Queen Elizabeth II as the nation's head of state." There it is for the poor, ignorant rest-of-the-world, who will now know that it isn't even a Canadian citizen who is the final proprietor of the sanctity of Parliament, but a messenger who is responsible to a queen who lives in a castle across a large ocean.

Both the fans of the humbled and panicky Harper and fans of the scrambled-egg coalition of Liberals and NDP, supported by the Quebec separatists, waved banners and defiant posters in rallies across Canada on the weekend. Where were the rallies of ordinary intelligent Canadians who are so ashamed that in 2008 we still can't cut the strings to Mummy England?

In the 1980s, this scribbler's employer, Southam News, shipped me to Washington for five years to cover the White House, then occupied by Ronald Reagan and the elder Bush. I determined that one thing I would attempt over the term was to get away from the incestuous cabal of politicians, lobbyists and journalists that populated the capital and travel to the 50 states to get the feelings of ordinary Americans.

I made it to 48 and found throughout that Americans, wherever I went, could not take Canada seriously because, well, the feeling was that it had never grown up. Here was the United States -- a nation, then No. 1 in the world, that had fought a war of independence to rid itself of the Brit colonials, and its nearest neighbour to the north still could not declare itself entirely independent.

Nothing has changed. Our G8 and G20 partners still -- justifiably -- regard us as somewhat awkward junior relatives who cannot stand completely alone and persist with this embarrassing connection to a foreign country far away. Last week a European

commentator speaking about our constitutional crisis told his listeners that Canada was "a banana republic with snowflakes." Too true.

Good Queen Bess, a fine woman, is now headed for 85 and is showing it. Twenty years ago, there were at least five visits of some of the Royals to Canada each year. Today that has shrunk to almost zero. Perhaps even Buck House is giving us the hint.

Queen Elizabeth recognizes she cannot give up the post because she remembers the past. That would be her selfish uncle, the Prince of Wales, who fled the throne to hook up with the much-married Wallis Simpson -- and spent the rest of his life wandering the globe as a lost, confused exile. Edward's abdication forced her shy father, who didn't want the job, to become king, a task that killed him and therefore ruined the youth of a 25-year-old bride who had to accept a heavy crown.

She knows she cannot just toss the monarchy to someone else (the Queen Mum lasted until 101, remember) and unless the puerile powers-that-be in Ottawa cut the trans-Atlantic cord, this country will once again become the laughing-stock of the world when, upon her death, we are made to accept Prince Charles as King of Canada. One shudders. No, one weeps.

Michaëlle Jean is a decent person, but her background in public broadcasting was no match for the bullying last week of the desperate Harper. Let us hope that after Jan. 26 she will tell him that his fate will be decided by the 308 MPs elected by the voters of Canada.

The *Times'* Ottawa man, Ian Austen, is a solid reporter who has allowed that he has trouble getting Canadian political stories into his paper and that American readers seem to prefer tales of the births of cute polar bear babies.

The story now is not polar bear pups. The story is the puppet.

National Post
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