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No offence, Prince, but our ties to the monarchy should end

By Jeffrey Simpson
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

After Queen Elizabeth - long may she reign over us! - it's time to recognize we are Canadian, not British

Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, Canada and sundry countries is 83 years old. God bless her, and long may she reign over us - after which Canada should cut its ties to the British monarchy.

Her son and successor, and his wife, arrive on Monday for a coast-to-coast meet and greet with their future subjects, us. Think of it: Charles, now prince but eventually king, his face on our currency, his picture on our official walls, his title to be head of state of Canada - unless we resolve to say no to those unwelcome certainties.

Prince Charles has views on such matters as modern architecture and organic gardening that are worth raising, even commendable. And he has certainly had a difficult time of things, waiting seemingly forever to climb onto the throne. Then there was the unpleasantness of, as the late Diana, Princess of Wales, once famously said, three people in a marriage: her, Charles and his now-wife.

It could not have been easy to have lived through - indeed, to have been intimately involved - in the Diana soap opera. He emerged from it as well as could be expected, under the circumstances of her being a star and all that and he being, well, Charles.

But really, amusing as those affairs were, his fitness to be King of the United Kingdom is something for him and his future subjects there, whereas his fitness to be King of Canada is something entirely for us. And the issue is less about Charles himself, although personalities cannot be removed from public matters, as about the appropriateness and the fit of the British monarchy - and it is a British institution, no matter what its clangorous defenders say in Canada - for contemporary Canadian realities.

Happily, relations between Britain and Canada are excellent.

Our governments generally agree on world matters - climate change excepted these days. We are fighting together, as we have in the past. We share the more sensitive intelligence information, which we do with few others. The number of Canadians with family ties to Britain and vice versa is considerable and valuable. We trade with each other, talk sensibly to each other, work together. Few relations for Canada are as free and easy as with Britain.

But they are British, and we are Canadians. That is not a statement of threat or disapproval or arrogance, but rather of fact.

Decades ago, we shared so much that, in the eyes of many Canadians, we were, if not one, then part of the same close family, generically tied by institutions such as the monarchy and Empire/Commonwealth.

Times change, however. Countries grow. Demography alters. In Canada's case, slowly it grew up, relying less on British crutches.

Indeed, it grew up in a way that should make Britain proud, because Canada moved from being a colony to a self-governing Dominion to a fully sovereign country in a peaceful, tolerant way, without much internal discord and almost no bad feelings toward the Mother Country. It didn't happen this way anywhere else in the Empire, except maybe in the Antipodean countries, and even there, in Australia, the Brits are "Pommies."

Canada has the luxury, assuming the Queen remains in good health - long may she reign! - to prepare for the transition to making the Office of the Governor-General the office of the head of state, period. No constitutional debates about whether the Queen or G-G is head of state, de jure or de facto, distinctions that leave all but the most discerning foreigner, to say nothing of ordinary Canadians, baffled.

There is no golden formula for executing this move, although options abound. The head of state could be selected by Parliament, the people, or the 150 Companions of the Order of Canada, a representative sample of the best citizens the country has produced.

We need only to make the decision that we should make a decision, and then figure out the modality to executing it. Polls, for what they are worth, suggest that Canadians in the majority would be prepared for a change, sensing that, yes, the time is right.

And yet our politicians are frozen. They will not speak about the issue. Either they do not think it important (likely), or the monarchists have frightened them because of the racket they would raise (even more likely). Even the NDP, which struggles for attention and has often prided itself with being on the cutting edge of debates, remains silent. It is to wonder.

Canadians shall fortunately be able to see a part of their future during this Charles and Camilla walkabout. The amiable foreigners' supporters will treat them to the usual spectacle of fawning adulation; the rest will leave them to wander about, harmlessly one supposes, but nonetheless offering more than a glimpse of what lies in store for us, unless we make the decision to make a decision.

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