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Uh-Oh Canada's faux pas

By Ken Gray, The Ottawa Citizen

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Sometimes governments need to lead, sometimes follow. Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in his proposal to change O Canada, had decided to lead, but faced with some opposition from the public, he then decided to cave.

Harper had chosen to get in front of the rewording of O Canada ... at least until Friday, when he changed his mind. The prime minister believed that the words "all thy sons" were sexist, before Friday anyway, and he was right. Still, there was no groundswell of opinion that the lyrics of the national anthem needed changing. Harper wasn't elected on rewording O Canada.

But the prime minister saw a problem and decided to right it. At least until it became controversial. His flip-flop actually gets him in bigger trouble. Does he not believe that both sexes should be treated equally in the national anthem or in society? Given his change of heart, how strongly does he feel? Who is giving the PM advice? Maybe it's time to fire the help.

Now that the government has opened the issue of rewording O Canada, perhaps it should separate church and state in the anthem. "God keep our land glorious and free" puts religion in the forefront of a major national symbol. Revolutions have been fought over less. Canada enshrines religion in its national anthem. In fact, in the French version of the anthem, we have Canadians marching forward with the cross. That smacks of the Crusades, certainly uncharacteristic of modern Canada.

Nothing quite says home to Muslim new Canadians like marching crosses. No doubt some Jews, Hindus and other religious groups pause on that bit of gargle. It even bothers me as an agnostic. I would rather put my faith in 33-million people keeping Canada "glorious and free" than a deity I can neither see nor touch. It's not that I don't respect people who are religious, and certainly all should be free to practise their faith in fruitful ways, but it does not need to be reflected in our national symbols. Is god, of whatever brand, required in the anthem? Not if we are serious about separating church and state.

I still sing the national anthem, marching crosses and all, mostly in large noisy crowds so my tuneless voice blends in, because I like the people from British Columbia, Newfoundland and points between. Because I want to share a sense of community with my national brothers and sisters while praising the country's freedoms, rule of law, character, land and rights. But not a time goes by as I come to "God keep our land" that I don't feel like a hypocrite reciting it. It's not so serious that I don't sing; I'm just bothered by it.

But then, no country is perfect. If everyone required all their beliefs and ethics honoured by the state, there would be no place to live. I stumble over the fact that Canada has a Queen, for that

institution doesn't reflect the country I know. Canada is not British anymore, but rather wonderfully independent with its own institutions and culture while the Queen is vaguely colonial.

Canadians sang O Canada many times at the patriotic Vancouver Olympic Games, not God Save the Queen. As well, I wonder how deeply hurt French Canada is about a monarchy that does not reflect its culture and heritage. So, too, the Governor General, capable and charming as Michaëlle Jean is. And the Senate harkens back to a time when undemocratic wealth and privilege governed the British Empire. None of those institutions reflects the Canada I know and I hope sometime in my life they will be gone. But I acquiesce to them because the larger concept of Canada appeals to me.

Even brilliant U.S. comedian Stephen Colbert joked in his recent shows from Vancouver that he wondered when Canada would gain its independence from Britain. I rather wonder about that myself.

When I visited Vancouver during the Olympics, I never felt more Canadian, wiping a tear from my eye now and then as my compatriots acquitted themselves so well. And we sang O Canada as proudly as we ever have.

But now the prime minister, reverting to Canada the timid, can't even lead on changing a transparently sexist passage in the national anthem, so there is little chance of him moving on the church and state question or any of the other dated icons in society.

No word yet on how Harper feels on the controversial motherhood-and-apple pie issue, but we can safely presume that he will lead from behind on it.

Ken Gray is a Citizen editorial board member who produces a blog, The Bulldog, at ottawacitizen.com/bulldog. His column runs on Wednesdays. E-mail: kgray@thecitizen.canwest.com

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