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Let's get rid of Victoria Day

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Bob Hepburn

This coming Monday, the little park just a few steps away from my house will be filled with people from dawn until late in the evening.

In the early morning hours, aging men and women from China will be practising tai chi on the asphalt volleyball court. By noon, children whose parents emigrated from the Caribbean will be playing on slides and swings. In the afternoon, families originally from Sri Lanka will be enjoying picnics.

Later, gangs of youths will be setting off firecrackers well into the night. Yes, I know it's illegal, but try telling that to the kids.

This is Canada today.

It's a land where people from all parts of the world live, work and play in harmony for the most part, and where they can celebrate their unique heritages while at the same time being proudly Canadian.

So why then, in this country that champions itself as a world leader in multiculturalism and diversity, do we continue to set aside a national holiday to honour a foreign monarch who died 107 years ago and who was once the head of the Anglican Church?

I am willing to bet that hardly anyone using my neighbourhood park on Monday will know – or care less – who we are supposed to be honouring with this three-day holiday weekend.

As in past years, I will watch the activities in the park and wonder why Canada, which claims to be independent, keeps marking the birth of a long dead British queen who never set foot on this soil, yet doesn't have a single national holiday to honour a Canadian.

Indeed, Canada is virtually the last country to mark Victoria Day.

Even the British don't commemorate it. Instead, they celebrate the Queen's Birthday – on a Saturday in June, not a weekday. And there's no national public holiday.

To be clear, I fully agree we should keep the Monday as a holiday. Everybody loves long weekends, especially one linked with the unofficial start to spring gardening and opening up cottages.

But it is time to stop calling it Victoria Day, a sad vestige of British colonialism. Rather, we should rename it for a person or event with more meaning to modern Canada.

Countries change, as Canada has.

When I, the son of a British-born mother, was in elementary school in Ajax, we sang *God Save the Queen* each morning. We pledged our allegiance to the Queen, which, sadly, immigrants applying for Canadian citizenship must still do. We saluted the Union Jack.

Such bowing and scraping to Britain seems archaic now.

Part of the transformation for Canada has been to drop the notion we are tied to Britain. Obviously, this upsets the tiny band of monarchists, who say Victoria should be honoured as the "Mother of Confederation." (It also ignores the fact that the Queen is our head of state, which polls indicate just 5 per cent of us know, but that is an issue for another column.)

Canada started celebrating Victoria's birthday in 1845, when it was still a British territory. She was born May 24, 1819. After her death, the holiday was changed to mark the current monarch's birthday as well. In 1952, the official celebration was switched to the first Monday before May 25, thus ensuring a three-day weekend.

Several countries mark the Queen's Birthday holiday, including Australia and New Zealand. Hong Kong stopped marking it in 1997 when the territory reverted to China's control.

Quebec got smart long ago. It has had several names for the day, but now calls it Patriots' Day, to commemorate the memory of those who

struggled for democratic institutions during the Lower Canada Rebellion of 1837-1838.

So why can't the rest of Canada be like Quebec and declare a new name for the day? And no, it shouldn't be the silly "2-4 Day" that beer companies hope to foist on us in honour of their beer cases.

In the United States, they have Presidents Day. They also have Martin Luther King Day to celebrate the famous civil rights figure.

We could call it Prime Ministers Day. Or maybe Jacques Cartier Day, or Simon Fraser Day.

My friend Duncan says we could call it Peacekeepers Day, but even he admits the name doesn't have much of a "ring" to it.

Clearly, the choices for a new name are endless, but the point is simple: we can't be a grown-up country in the 21st century if we stick with Victoria Day.

Bob Hepburn's column appears every Thursday. bhepburn@thestar