



OTTAWA CITIZEN

A royal farewell

BY JANICE KENNEDY, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 8, 2010



Prince Philip and the Queen wave goodbye to Ottawa as they board a plane on Saturday bound for Winnipeg to continue the next leg of the royal tour.

Photograph by: Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

Is it safe? Has she gone? Because I don't want to offend anyone -- not Herself, and not my fellow countrymen who turned out in throngs to cheer her, many waving little Union Jacks.

Trying to have a civilized conversation about the monarchy in Canada was just not possible during Her Majesty's recent visit, so I thought it best to wait until she'd left.

And until, perhaps, some of us returned to our senses after the celebrity tour that dazzled thousands of us, again, with the presence of a woman who seems genuinely lovely, who has an undeniably beautiful smile, who is hard-working and dutiful beyond all imagining. And who was right here! In person! Waving at us!

In fact, it's always difficult to discuss the abstract concept of the monarchy in Canada when its real-life representation is so darned gracious. Elizabeth II, who has been on our stamps and currency for as long as most of us can remember, is a fixture in our lives, warmly timeless. (Confession time: Some of us even kept The-Queen-and-Prince-Philip scrapbooks as kids.) Debating whether or not Canada should maintain its constitutional monarchy inevitably degenerates into a discussion of this particular woman's admirable character and personality.

Except Elizabeth II is not the issue. Canada's sense of self is.

A fellow I met last week tried to convey to me his excitement at having seen the Queen downtown. When I didn't appear to share his thrill, he tried to educate me. The monarchy is our heritage, he said. It's been our heritage for centuries.

But it hasn't -- and not just because Canada as we know it is only 143 years old. Pre-Confederation, Canada's heritage of loyalty to the British Crown stretches back an extra century, to when British soldiers beat French soldiers in present-day Quebec. Before that, there was loyalty to the British Crown in the Atlantic regions (except among Acadians, understandably), and loyalty to the Bourbon crown of France in the rest of the known settlements. And before that, with the original Canadians -- aboriginal communities right across the land -- loyalties were varied and tribal.

Nations evolve and grow. Just ask the Scots, who saw their independence disappear in 1707, when what Robert Burns called "a parcel of rogues" engineered the Acts of Union, effectively absorbing Scotland into bigger, bossier England -- though it was re-branded "Great Britain." Three centuries later, Scots nationalists are still trying to reclaim their independence.

For better and for worse, things change. Contrary to the one-note declarations of Canada's indefatigable monarchists, nothing is immutable when it comes to constitutional frameworks. And nothing should be immutable, if we want growth and progress.

There's no question that the notion of constitutional change in the Canadian context is massively daunting. Given the seeming impossibility built into the post-1982 amending formula (unanimous consent of the federal and all 10 provincial governments? seriously?), doing away with the monarchy might seem about as likely as the QEII getting itself tugged up the St. Lawrence by a rowboat.

But still. Our great national sigh of pragmatic ennui -- why bother? it's so much trouble -- is simply not defensible. Not for any nation with a shred of self-respect.

Here are the baldest of bald facts. Canada, a progressive, self-sufficient, modern democracy with an ethnically and culturally diverse population, has a head of state who is a foreign national. This foreign national, who resides across the ocean and is head of the Church of England, is not therefore permitted to be Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, Hindu, professed atheist or even United Church. She (or he, in time) has no experience of the country beyond celebrity tours, and she (or he) knows nothing about us beyond the carefully crafted information provided by "advisers." Oh, and Canada's head of state attains this elevated status not through democratic election or merit or service to the nation, but by virtue of birth. In another country.

Despite the childhood scrapbook, the residual affection, the personal admiration, the respect for our British history and heritage, the basic habits of a lifetime, I see something terribly wrong with this picture. And, judging by the latest poll results, I think two-thirds of my fellow citizens may be on the same wavelength.

At 143 years of age, Canada embarrasses itself by still playing the adolescent.

It is time to move on. We don't have to go barging out of the house, slamming doors as we leave. An appreciative, respectful farewell will do just fine. We can keep celebrating our history and that part of our heritage that is British. We can stay in the Commonwealth. We can continue to be good hosts, inviting reigning British monarchs over to visit us for old times' sake.

But in the meantime, it really is time to say goodbye.

It really is time to grow up.

Janice Kennedy writes here on Thursdays.