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Is Canada fit for a future king?

By Roy MacGregor
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Should we give Jug Ears a second chance?

The Prime Minister's Office confirmed this past week that there will be one, possibly two, royal visits to Canada within the next year.

The Queen will almost certainly open the Winter Games in Vancouver next February, but another possibility is that the Prince of Wales will come earlier, perhaps as soon as this fall.

If so, it will provide a remarkable opportunity for Canadians to kick the tires on their future head of state. The Queen, after all, turns 83 in a couple of weeks and is the longest-living British monarch of all time; Prince Charles, at 60, is already the oldest-ever Prince of Wales.

The Queen is enormously popular in Canada, just as she is virtually everywhere in the Commonwealth. The Prince far less so. In fact, he's been regarded pretty much as a twit during his years in waiting, the kinky lover who wished he was a tampon, the two-timing husband of the multitiming Diana, the snob who said he'd quit England before he'd quit fox hunting.

It had been somewhat presumed in Canada - even more so in Australia - that once the beloved Queen goes, so, too, should the unloved Prince and the whole archaic, colonial, goofy idea of a monarchy in which males count for more than females and Roman Catholics count for nothing.

The Queen cannot go on forever, despite evidence to the contrary. Her mother, the rock in Elizabeth's life, reached 101. Soon she will overtake George III, who sat on the throne for 59 years, and likely Queen Victoria, who reigned 63 years. The thinking used to be that the Queen would "retire" in favour of the patient prince, then there was even some unlikely hope, backed by polls, that the Crown would "skip" a generation down to the far-more-popular Prince William. But you hear none of that now. William, in fact, gives the impression the throne is the last thing he'd ever want.

It used to be assumed that Australia would be first to shake off the monarchy, but a referendum there failed in 1999 and there seems no rush these days to become a republic. Even political scientist John Warhurst of the Australian Republican Movement is now saying he sees only a one-in-three chance of an early second referendum succeeding. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in London this week for the G20 gathering, told BBC that it will happen one day, but not for a good while.

In Canada, the appetite for electoral reform - much less than getting rid of the Queen - has gone nowhere, really. Prince Edward Island and Ontario turned thumbs down and British Columbia, which already rejected it once, will have another look during the May 12 provincial election.

As for federal changes, it's rather hard to imagine any with a Prime Minister who began with a party trumpeting Triple-E Senate - Equal, Elected and Effective - and now embraces a Triple-C Senate: Conservative, Connected and Controlled.

A great many Canadians were grateful this past winter that Canada has remained a constitutional monarchy. While many of us would have welcomed a little explanation for the Governor-General's reasoning, it is hard to fault the Queen's representative for choosing a "time out" over a bizarre three-headed government run by the inimitable StÃ©phane Dion - "Imagine a mannequin," Montreal comedian Steve Patterson says, "then take away 50 per cent of the charisma."

But now imagine, if you can, King Charles III - though he may choose another name in order not to be confused with Bonnie Prince Charlie, who was calling himself Charles III before his defeat at Culloden.

Prince Charles is unlikely to change from being an ill-tempered poor listener, but marriage to Camilla Parker Bowles has brought a certain late maturity. But also the world has fallen more in line with many of those views that previously branded him a "flake."

Organic gardening? He was not only ahead of the curve, he may have *been* the curve.

Talk to the plants? They said he was crazy more than 20 years ago when he suggested this, but now they're doing scientific research on it.

And as for environmental warnings, Al Gore was still inventing the Internet when Charlie was warning the world against the ultimate effects of so much blind consumption of natural resources and fossil fuels. Now he's saying that Earth has "less than 100 months" to get its act together before the damage is beyond repair.

He's hardly an environmentalist saint himself - one day he collects rainwater to flush the toilets on his estate, the next he books a private jet to take him on a tour of South America - but his pronouncements have led British royal historian David Starkey to speculate that Prince Charles could conceivably become the "reinventor" of the monarchy.

"I used to scoff at the idea of an eco-monarchy," Mr. Starkey told the Daily Express, "but at the moment he's looking awfully like a prophet."

Just exactly what he would look like as king - and by extension head-of-state for such faraway places as Australia and Canada - is unknowable until he gets there, which could still be many years off.

Supposedly, however, he's currently waiting for the necessary invite from Canada to come see the country he has not seen for nearly a decade.

Which would also give this country a fresh look at him.

And an opportunity to think about whether we would rather move on - or else continue on with an office that may make little sense but a man who at least makes some.

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