

## **New stages of Canadian nationhood? Forget it**

Lawrence Martin

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*Man was made at the end of the week's work, when God was tired.*

### **–Mark Twain**

Thanks, Mr. Twain, we get the message. Best to keep expectations low.

Canada's 150th birthday in 2017 isn't that far away. For big dreamers, the realization of national projects to mark the occasion stir the imagination. One, as we are reminded by the sightseeing tour of Charles and Camilla, is a final break with our colonial vestiges. The creation of an independent republic of Canada. Nothing less than a new identity to replace whatever the old one was.

Another is a grand reform – proportional representation – of the electoral system with all the alleged good stuff that comes with it. The creation of a democracy that functions like a true democracy. Fair representation. New voices at the table. A move away from the “one-man rule” trend that has blighted our system.

Then there are the many who hope for a green revolution in the real sense of the term. Not just reluctant quarter measures, but a country taking the lead in the purification of the ecosystem.

The country – idling, some might say – might be due for something audacious. It's been two decades and more since the pulsating debates over free trade and the Meech Lake/Charlottetown accords. Those debates wore everyone down. A break was needed, and 20 years is a good break.

Alas, no one should let their hopes fly. A new stage of nationhood is not in the offing to mark the 150th. The forces that vie against untying the colonial knot or making our electoral system a 21st-century one or other ventures of magnitude are too entrenched.

It might not be the people holding back the tides of change. Fifty per cent or more of Canadians, for example, say they want a break with the monarchy. But the *vox populi* goes unheard. Try finding even 1 per cent of the MPs in our two major political parties who would dare voice the same sentiment. They cower at the prospect. For proportional representation, there is also strong support, but neither Liberals nor Conservatives reflect it. Their interests wouldn't be served.

Such issues, as MPs correctly noted this week, aren't at the top of voters' minds. There are more pressing and immediate concerns. But there have been leaders, proactive not reactive, who create demand. They make the case, push back the mountains, blaze the trails.

"We're stuck in short-term thinking," said Justin Trudeau, whose star is rising in the parliamentary precincts. "Major change requires a level of political maturity that collectively we have not been showing."

Aside from the lack of daring, induced in part by the minority status of the government, other factors strike against the chances of change by 2017. On the question of monarchy, Australia tried to sever the knot a decade ago but failed. Had the bid succeeded, there would have been momentum in this country.

The dramatic change would require the unanimous consent of Parliament and the provinces. Canadian legislators know from experience the problems that this can cause. Moreover, since the monarchy is viewed as powerless, the attitude is: Why bother? Of course, it isn't powerless, as seen last December when the Governor-General, without a word of public explanation, single-handedly decided the fate of the Conservative government.

Similarly, a move to proportional representation faces big roadblocks. There is widespread agreement that our antiquated system needs reform and that PR has many advantages. Under such a system, for instance, the Greens would now have 17 seats, the Conservatives would be represented in Montreal and Toronto, the NDP wouldn't have 12 seats fewer than the Bloc while scoring a million more votes than that party in the last election. But campaigns for PR in Ontario and British Columbia failed. Canadians are tired of minorities, and PR tends to produce minorities and, worse, coalitions.

As for a real green revolution, the timing works against game-changing measures. Recessionary, not green, spending is the priority.

Canadian power elites are still dominated by aging, boring and adventureless boomers. Unlike days past, risk takers are in short supply. Today, there may well be a will, untapped, among the people for big change. But for the country's big birthday, there are no trailblazers to light the way.