

SUNDAY MORNING

BY JANICE KENNEDY

Letting go the reign

Anti-monarchists unite forces to cut Canada's royal ties

She's back home now in her palace across the ocean. We can stow our bowing and scraping until the next time a member of the Windsor family favours us with a visit. For a little while, at least, we can stop renaming good Canadian highways and buildings after a monarch living in a foreign capital.

I'd say "foreign monarch," but the forces of monarchical correctness would point out — correctly — that Elizabeth II (by the grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Her other Realms and Territories Queen et cetera) is also the Queen of Canada. Because we are a constitutional monarchy, the forces would have you believe, we are stuck with Elizabeth, her heirs and her descendants forever.

That subtlety seemed to be lost on some of the westerners interviewed during recent festivities in Saskatchewan and Alberta, where enthusiastic spectators explained that it wasn't every day they got to see "the Queen of England."

No, sadly. She's our Queen, too.

The Queen of Canada was crowned 52 years ago Thursday in London, England, against a spectacular tapestry of British pomp and pageantry. Before 8,000 invited guests at Westminster Abbey, the Archbishop of Canterbury asked the Lord to grant Elizabeth "faithful Parliaments and quiet realms." Then, wearing royal purple and the Imperial Crown of State, she was paraded in her Cinderella coach through wet streets thronged with an estimated three million people. Back home at Buckingham Palace, during the obligatory family balcony scene, multitudes of waves to the adoring crowds alternated with admiring glances skyward at the massive air force fly-past. God save the Queen.

Of Canada. If any part of that sticks in your craw — the "of Canada" part in combination with the parts that name foreign places, ritual celebrations of entitlement and primogeniture, or bowing and scraping generally — you may be ready for a new group giving birth to itself across the country.

Citizens for a Canadian Republic

was founded in 2002, the year of the Queen's Jubilee, by an Ontarian named Tom Freda and an Albertan named Pierre Vincent. Freda, a 48-year-old Toronto designer and photographer, is its national director. Long committed to the belief that an independent Canada must sever its ties to monarchy — and encouraged by polls showing that most Canadians are not active supporters of the



monarchy, either — he is passionate about the cause and about CCR.

There are a number of chapters across the country (with one in Ottawa scheduled for launch some time in the next couple of months), and about 1,000 members nationwide. The numbers have been growing ever since the group decided to make membership free. The important thing, says Freda, is to get the message out.

That's something he's been doing with gusto. He's met with senators and members of Parliament (enough to be able to assert that the desire to get rid of the Queen is something that exists across all party lines), as well as with people from coast to coast on his extensive travels. "I know the country well enough to say that this is a mainstream issue."

There's a variety of republican opinion within the group, mind you. According to Freda, some want all ties with Britain severed, including Commonwealth membership. Some want to maintain status in the Commonwealth — where, in fact, the majority of countries are republics. Some are part of CCR because "they're devout anti-monarchists who see the very idea of monarchy as an affront to civilization." There's room for all perspectives, he says.

Last month, CCR joined forces with republican movements in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, creating an

international umbrella organization they call Common Cause. The idea is that even though there are different histories and compelling reasons for abolishing the monarchy in all four places — from colonial hangovers to democratic affronts — each of the groups can bring its own successes and failures to the table, sharing lessons learned with the others.

"We network quite closely," says Freda. "It's a supportive alliance."

The group here is particularly concerned with promoting a Canadian head of state for Canada — a citizen of the country who is not above its laws, including those laws that prohibit discrimination based on religion and ethnic origin, something that is entrenched within the British monarchy.

They'd be happy, too, to start the process with a step that wouldn't even require a constitutional amendment — namely, reforming the office of the Governor General. CCR would like to see it codified, made more transparent and, as far as the selection process is concerned, democratized.

The biggest roadblock, Freda readily acknowledges, has been apathy. People may not be enthusiastic monarchists, but neither are they enthusiastic boat-rockers. Still, he's hopeful.

"We see the indifference changing, and our strategy is to deal with this. As the Queen's reign comes to an end, Canadians have to start realizing that they can't keep dragging their feet." Waiting until Charles III is already King of Canada, in other words, would probably not be the best idea.

Freda knows there's vehement opposition out there, even if it's a minority. He's had death threats and received poisonous letters, most of them accusing him of selling out. (To whom? Why, to immigrants, to francophones and to

American interests — against all of whom the monarchy is apparently a bastion. No, I don't understand it, either.) Some of the venom has been a variation on the theme of "Why don't you go back where you came from?"

Which, uh, would be Halifax. It makes no difference to his citizenship or nationalist credentials, he says, but he's actually an eighth-generation Canadian who had at least one ancestor fighting for the Crown.

"History is important," he agrees, "and there's no reason we shouldn't be celebrating it." But it should not be an impediment to full and independent nationhood.

The other night (after yet another day of royal visiting and throne speechifying and sovereign expressions of deep affection), I mentioned my conversation with Freda and my introduction to his citizens' group.

"That's one organization I wouldn't mind joining," was the immediate response. "Where do I sign up?"

You can call the group at its Bloor Street headquarters in Toronto (416-705-5660), or you can download a membership form and get more information at its website, www.canadian-republic.ca

It's still early, but Freda believes the momentum is growing. Forty years from now, he predicts, Canadians will look back on the day we finally dumped the monarchy and say (as we now say about our flag), "What took so long?"

Good question. It's been a very long time indeed since our sense of nationhood depended upon a patronizing injunction to be a "faithful Parliament" and a "quiet realm" for some high-born citizen of a foreign land. For growing numbers of us, the day we officially embrace that truth can't come soon enough.

Janice Kennedy's column appears here weekly.

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