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Prince's Tour Revives Canada Debate on Tie to Monarchy

Royalty: 'No sane person would elect Charles dogcatcher,' sniffs one newspaper columnist.

April 26, 1996 | CRAIG TURNER | TIMES STAFF WRITER

The Prince of Wales toured this wintry gateway to Canada's agricultural heartland Thursday during a weeklong trip to Canada that many are treating as a Canadian audition by the heir to the throne.

Media treatment of the visit repeatedly has referred to Prince Charles as "the man who would be king of Canada," and more than a few Canadians are ready to put a question mark at the end of that phrase. His trip has revived the national debate on whether Canada should sever its ties with the British monarchy when the reign of Queen Elizabeth II ends.

Jeffrey Simpson, national political columnist for the Globe and Mail newspaper, wrote last week: "Just ask yourself the straight-up question: Do you want Charles as head of state, his picture on the currency, his persona the one to which we swear allegiance? . . . No sane person would elect Charles dogcatcher."

On the prince's arrival Tuesday, a parliamentary backbencher for the ruling Liberal Party, Alex Shepherd, issued a call for the sovereign to be replaced by a "uniquely Canadian head of state."

"It is time for us to grow up as a country," Shepherd told reporters.

Amid such speculation, the prince has used this trip to stress his affection for Canada.

"Every time I come to Canada, and I have been here many times since 1970, a little bit more of Canada seeps into my bloodstream and from there goes straight to the heart," he told a black-tie dinner here Wednesday night.

As he was driven around Winnipeg on Thursday in a heavy snowstorm, Charles punctuated pro forma visits to a museum, a hospital, a school and a marketplace with efforts to reach out to ordinary citizens. At one point, joking with hospital staff members gathered around him for a plaque unveiling, he said the staff had "abandoned most of the patients."

As at earlier stops in Ottawa and Churchill, Manitoba, politely enthusiastic crowds greeted the prince. The only exception was outside a school of predominantly Indian students, where more than two dozen demonstrators protested what they called broken treaty promises.

The low-key approach is a marked contrast to the outpouring of affection during the prince's last visit, in 1991, when he was accompanied by his now-estranged wife, Diana, Princess of Wales, and their two sons, William and Harry. Charles is traveling solo on this trip.

As Charles arrived here, the capital of the province of Manitoba, Winnipeg residents appeared more preoccupied with the playoff fate of their beloved hockey team, the Jets, who are abandoning the city for Phoenix next season.

Pat Qually, 55, who waited 45 minutes for the prince at the historic Forks Market and was rewarded with a handshake and a brief conversation, acknowledged that her friends and neighbors do not share her enthusiasm.

"The royal family isn't as popular as it has been in the past," she said. "The younger generation just isn't as aware of the ties to the royal family or Britain."

Like many former British colonies and member nations of the Commonwealth, Canada recognizes Elizabeth II and her heirs as head of state. But a poll by the Angus Reid organization in January showed that only 44% of the public supported continued links with the British monarchy, with 47% favoring abolition.

Given the Windsor family's well-chronicled scandals, staunch monarchists have been careful to defend the institution rather than the current occupants of Buckingham Palace. One of their most frequent arguments is that Canada's parliamentary monarchy is one of the most important things that differentiates this country from the United States.

Perhaps their strongest card, however, is the sheer difficulty of amending the Canadian Constitution, given the chronic fractiousness of domestic politics. An amendment would be necessary to oust the royal family.