



Zimbabwe, run by the Queen

However wonderful as individuals, our governors general are walking, talking anachronisms who tell the world that Canada is not a grown-up country

BY KEITH SPICER, CITIZEN SPECIAL DECEMBER 22, 2008

 Compliments of TD Waterhouse

PARIS -- 'A woodchuck!' That's what a Stratford actor yelled out when a 1991 meeting asked what might replace the Queen. As recent Ottawa shenanigans make clear, the mandate of Her Canadian Majesty offends many democrats. It's a cobweb of history -- just like her charmingly named (Gentleman) Usher of the Black Rod.

December on the Rideau: Finally the world pays (a little) attention to Canada. And what does it see? Zimbabwe run by the Queen -- except nobody's starving, and the only people hurting seem to be Canadians slapping foreheads in disbelief. A person called "governor-general" shutting down Parliament? And she represents (it seems) the Queen of England? Hang on: wasn't Canada an independent country?

This month's Ottawa circus has perplexed and amused foreigners like nothing in a generation. It hinted at France's Fourth Republic (1946-58) where 21 governments rose and fell on backroom cabals. Or Italy's First Republic (1947-92), which launched a merry-go-round of 61 governments.

More to the point: It set back Canada's efforts to present itself as an independent country by 50 years. Causing this overdue questioning were national unity, time, puffed-up office-holders (backed by short-sighted prime ministers) -- and the intrinsic difficulty of explaining to foreigners the doctrine of the juridical divisibility of the Crown.

Fifty years ago, the main anti-monarchist force was Quebec. But it was benign opposition: pragmatic Quebecers reasoned that if their "Anglo" compatriots couldn't cut loose from Britain's apron-strings, les Canadiens would just shut up -- and wait for the Anglos to grow up. Decades have passed, with millions of non-British immigrants adding perspectives from clearly independent (if often impoverished) nations.

Meanwhile, governors general, echoing Vincent Massey's "governor generalities," went with the flow of borrowed regality. They started travelling abroad as Canada's (actually the "Canadian Queen's") representative for funerals, war-graves ceremonies and goodwill missions. Gradually these visits snowballed -- Adrienne Clarkson's \$5.3-million polar excursion with an entourage of more than 50

friends and staff setting a dubious record.

Madame Michaëlle Jean, certainly the most sparkling vice-regal representative we have ever had, was a personal hit this year in France, even though her ambitious husband fancied himself as co-G-G.

Loyal retainers of any of our governors general would argue that all such visits do some good. Mesdames Clarkson and Jean highlighted Canada's multiculturalism. Others, like them, reminded Europeans of our war dead, or vaguely promoted this or that, such as an implausible pitch for Canadian wines.

The basic problem: The more our G-Gs appear abroad, the more they harm Canada's image as a modern, independent country. However wonderful as individuals, they are walking, talking anachronisms who tell the world that -- my God! -- Canada must still be some sort of colony.

You can't reason this away: Try explaining to any foreigner the doctrine of the divisibility of the Crown. This is the angels-on-a-pinhead fiction that a monarch resident in one country is also, "separately and equally," head of state of 15 other countries -- from Canada, Australia and New Zealand to Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and Belize. Decidedly, we are in the big leagues. Never mind that we have to compete with the other 15 even to see our monarch.

Why care if Canada's a constitutional joke abroad? Well, it feeds Quebec separatism almost as much as Jacques Parizeau's tax-sharing rants. It tells Canadian children every day, with each Queen-bearing dollar they clutch, that their country is not quite grown-up. Worst of all, it tells the world that we don't much respect ourselves. That we are an extraordinarily timid people -- most unlikely to invent anything, to export sophisticated goods (even a great winter car like Sweden's?), or to make a gutsy stand for a principle.

Our absentee-monarchy-loving image: polite, decent, but slightly slow and parochial folks. That's what you get on the French and British satirical shows. And on Jon Stewart's Daily Show -- which at least makes the satisfying claim that our Conservative party, in U.S. terms, is the "Gay-Nader-Fans-for-Peace" party.

Sad to say, "our" 82-year-old Queen must one day leave us, and not constitutionally. (Of course her dear Mum soldiered on to 101, preserved in Gilbey's gin, Dubonnet and Veuve Clicquot). If Elizabeth II were to get hit by a Rolls-Royce, her son Charles would instantly become King of Canada -- "The Queen is dead, Long Live the King!"

Trustworthy sources suggest there is no other succession plan. When the dust settles on the upcoming combat between monarchy-despising Stephen Harper and (it seems) monarchy-agnostic Michael Ignatieff, we should devise one. No party in Canada will fight for the Crown. To make a smooth, democratic transition to a Canadian republic, the only issue is how to involve the Canadian people.

When I was 10 years old, I thought the solution was an indigenous monarchy marrying my beloved Princess Margaret to hockey-hero Maurice Richard. Too late. After Elizabeth, I'd settle for a woodchuck.

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