

THE MONARCHY: GONE WITH THE WIND?

The monarchy's future is vigorously debated in Australia and even in Britain, but in Canada it is a non-issue. On the whole, mass indifference is probably a good thing. Abandoning the monarchy would require opening the constitution and re-visiting the nightmare of Meech and Charlottetown. Moreover, doing away with the Sovereign would raise the difficult question of where Canadian sovereignty then resided. Best let sleeping dogs lie.

L'avenir de la monarchie fait l'objet d'un vigoureux débat en Australie, tout comme en Angleterre. Au Canada, la question laisse les gens plutôt indifférents. Dans l'ensemble, cette apathie est probablement une bonne chose. L'abolition de la monarchie exigerait la réouverture du dossier constitutionnel et signifierait le retour des déchirements suscités par les accords du lac Meech et de Charlottetown. Qui plus est, le délestage du souverain soulèverait le difficile problème de préciser où résiderait alors la souveraineté canadienne. Mieux vaut ne pas déranger le chien qui dort.

Reg Whitaker

A few years ago, during yet another media flap over some unseemly behaviour by one or another Royal, I was caught off guard by a call from an effervescent young reporter. She wanted to know what I thought about the imbroglio's implications for the monarchy in Canada. Somewhat brusquely, I quoted her Clark Gable's parting words to Vivien Leigh at the end of *Gone With The Wind*: "Quite frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Flippant as that response was, I have since come to think of it as a distinctive Canadian position on the monarchy. Let's call it the "*Gone With The Wind* (*GWTW*) theory." I suspect it is actually the dominant Canadian view, even if usually unarticulated and unnamed.

There are, of course, many fervent monarchists still



around, even if their numbers are dwindling as an inexorable result of demography and attrition. They tend to be British in origin, aging, and characterized by a peculiar personality trait: Usually genteel and well-mannered, they can turn downright nasty in the face of any criticism of the monarchy. Anyone who has ever unwisely found themselves on a radio phone-in show saying anything even mildly derogatory about the Royals will know exactly what I mean. Nice little old ladies — everybody's grandmas — can suddenly turn vicious. One imagines receiving a Christmas pudding laced with arsenic.

In Australia, there has been a major debate on the future of the monarchy, certainly among the political elites but also extending down into the wider society. In Her Majesty's own homeland, there are sporadic debates about whether Britain needs monarchical institutions any longer, even if the monarchists tend to

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come out on top. But in Canada, there is no real debate at all — which in fact is not all that surprising: How could there be a debate between two sides, one of which is a beleaguered minority that gets very emotional about its allegiance, while the majority simply doesn't give a damn? Even before it starts, the debate is, well, gone with the wind.

All this is illustrated by some odd little incidents that occurred recently in Ottawa. It began in September, 1997, when Industry Minister John Manley, better known for flogging Canadian products and lobbying for corporate tax breaks, announced his support for a republic. His boss, the prime minister, quickly reassured Canadians that "I have enough [trouble] with the separatists of Quebec; I don't want to have problems with the monarchists of Canada."

A year later, Mr. Chrétien's press secretary, Peter Donolo, unaccountably announced that officials in the Prime Minister's Office were discussing abolishing the monarchy as a millennium project. Once again, the PM had to step in to prick the balloon, but not before monarchists were abruptly awakened from their afternoon naps for another round of *semper fidelis*.

All this was inexplicable enough to call forth a Machiavellian explanation by Scott Reid, author and former Reform party researcher, currently in Australia. "If public sentiments on either side of the issue can be stirred to the level that they have attained in Australia," Mr. Reid wrote in the *National Post*, "and the Bloc Québécois and Reform party can be driven into opposite corners on the issue, then the nominally monarchist Mr. Chrétien will be left in command of the middle ground. Then the government's real millennium project — the re-election of the Liberal party to a third term in office — will be one step closer to fulfillment." Either Mr. Reid or the

Liberals, or both, were being too clever by half. Public sentiments can only be stirred on this issue on one side, but not on the other. There is no Liberal middle ground to be seized when only one side is willing to don its armour.

But what of the reluctant, or indifferent, majority? As an adherent of the *GWTW* view, let me try to reconstruct the underlying logic of our position, even if, true to their fundamental apathy on this question, most of its followers can't be bothered to do so.

Superficially, Canada might appear to offer fertile soil for republicanism. After all, we have a long history of strained relations between the anglophone and francophone communities, and there is no doubt that, historically, the monarchy was a tool for maintaining anglo hegemony. Would not a Canadian republic, divested of the anachronistic trappings of anglo privilege, not be a better framework for building a political community of equals? In the 1960s, in the first fine, careless rapture of bilingualism and biculturalism, an end to the monarchy might have become a shared program between Quebec nationalists and Canadian dualists. It never happened.

Perhaps there were still too many fervent — and vigorous — monarchists around at the time. Recall the acrimony set off by the introduction of the Canadian flag, and John Diefenbaker's tears as the Red Ensign came down. But more importantly, hard Quebec nationalists quickly galloped off toward sovereignty as their ultimate goal, and the monarchy as an issue was lost in their dust. On all the lists of Quebec constitutional demands posed over the past three decades, termination or even modification of the monarchy has been conspicuously absent. Call this a Quebec variant of the *GWTW* theory. The rest of Canada was having enough difficulty trying to cope with bilingualism, dualism, special status, distinct society, asymmetrical federalism, sovereignty-association, partnership, and so on: There was no reason to antagonize the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire by pushing a demand that interested Quebecers as little as it did other Canadians.

Another potential reason for republicanism might be found in the rapid decline of the British component of "English" Canada. Demographically, the old British Canada has been swamped by postwar immigration, first from Europe and more recently from Asia and other parts of the Third World. The emergence since the 1970s of official multiculturalism is only a reflection of the multicultural and multiethnic reality of Canada at the end of the 20th century. Polls on the monarchy show that the growing non-British section

of the population is indifferent or uncomprehending on the question of the Royals. This is hardly surprising. Why would anyone whose origins are in Sicily or Punjab have any special interest in the House of Windsor — and how could they even begin to understand the particular history that has made the Queen of England the Queen of Canada?

And yet new Canadians are as indifferent to constitutional change as older Canadians are. The idea of a multicultural republic has not even made it onto the radar screens of ethno-cultural pressure groups. For one thing, having to give up their privileged place in Canadian life has been enough of a trauma for old stock British Canadians. What we might now refer to as “the British minority group” hangs grimly onto the monarchy as a badge of its own ethno-cultural distinctiveness, their equivalent of Slovakian folk dances or Chinese *dim sum*. New Canadians may reasonably conclude: Why rouse sleeping dogs over something that does not seem to matter anyway? In short, Canada’s “other ethnics” have effortlessly assimilated into the *GWTW* view.

Despite all the other changes that have taken place in Canada in the latter half of the 20th century, the monarchy remains. A cause of no great controversy, it has become a bit like those little semi-transparent corporate logos that live on the corners of our TV screens: always there, but hardly ever noticed anymore. In fact, our complete unconsciousness about the monarchy may explain some Canadian spectacles that outsiders might find slightly bizarre, but strike Canadians as perfectly ordinary. For instance, in the early 1980s Ottawa and eight provinces tussled titanically over the “patriation” of the Canadian constitution from Westminster. Supporters of patriation made much of the anachronism that our Constitution required the assent of the British parliament to be amended. And yet, after all the tumult, and the night of the long knives, when patriation finally had been accomplished, the event was commemorated by an official signing in Ottawa, with none other than Her Britannic Majesty Elizabeth II giving her gracious assent. To an outsider there might have appeared to be some disjuncture between form and content, but to Canadians it was just business as usual.

We could just leave it at that — at congenial logical incoherence — but I think there is a subtext to the *GWTW* theory that casts an interesting light upon a fundamental problem in Canadian politics. If monarchy is taken seriously, it has certain implica-

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tions for the nature of the political community. The monarch is known as the sovereign. Sovereignty (that most befuddling of all words in the Canadian political vocabulary) derives in part from the notion of kingship. Although sovereignty has been appropriated on behalf of all sorts of modern causes, such as democracy, nationalism, and even ethnic cleansing, it retains the core notion of the condensation of all power into a single head — if not the Monarch, then the Nation, or the People. Like its monarchical antecedents, modern sovereignty is notoriously imperious and intolerant of rivals. Hence the zero-sum game between sovereignists and federalists. Or the refusal of Quebec sovereignists to countenance any notion of the Cree and Inuit of northern Quebec going their own way after the achievement of Quebec sovereignty.

If Canada were to abolish the monarchy, it would be faced with a problem: What new “sovereign” would replace the old Sovereign? It is in the nature of sovereigns that any new usurper to the throne will brook no opposition. If sovereignty is now to be vested in the Canadian nation or the Canadian people, what precisely is this? Is it Canada including a Quebec that thinks of itself as a different, perhaps separate nation? Is it Preston Manning’s “New Canada,” shorn one way or another of a distinctive Quebec? Is it a two-headed, dualist sovereign nation, perhaps even sprouting additional heads — Aboriginal nations, regional identities — like some genetically engineered Medusa? In short, dump the Queen as Sovereign and we are back to the nightmarish landscape of Meech Lake, Charlottetown and Quebec neverendums. It would be bad enough to open those scenarios on behalf of issues that really concern Canadians, like Quebec’s place in or out of Canada, or justice for native peoples. But to open them up to abolish an institution that only a minority of the population even cares about one way or another? Not too likely.

The *GWTW* theory would explain the ascendancy of the monarchy in Canada’s past this way. The British Sovereign symbolized a continuity in space and time that was important for the non-American country clinging precariously to the northern half of a continent shaped by a republican revolution. More than that, for a time it also coincided with the dominant or hegemonic image of the Canadian People (white, British, English-speaking). A newer, slightly more democratic, version of sovereignty thus slipped into the form of the older version, without anyone noticing, or at least drawing attention to the subterfuge. However, the new sovereignty in the old bottle, as it were, began to lose its coherence in the latter half of the 20th century. All the dominant elements — racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic — were challenged from without or undermined from within. By century’s end, breaking the monarchical shell would only reveal the incoherence and disintegration of the elements inside. So better to leave the shell untouched than to embarrass ourselves with a public display of what now lies hidden under the Crown.

Is this a problem? Those of us who firmly and

enthusiastically hold to the *GWTW* view may not be overly concerned. What if Canada did fail to present a unified sovereign face to the world? What if we are Canadian, Québécois, or First Nations, rather than one unified, “sovereign” people? Why not be post-modern, with multiple, overlapping, and discontinuous identities?

If there is a problem, it is simply that the dominant language of constitutionalism and both national and international law cannot comprehend this riotous diversity. Hence the utility of maintaining an anachronistic fiction. Call it a sovereignty of convenience. Meanwhile we can go on improvising and coping in the real world, and leave it to the Australians, or even the British, to stir the slumbering dogs of monarchy. Perhaps eventually, sometime in the 21st century, that little Crown logo on the Canadian screen will become so transparent that it will finally vanish. And no one will notice.

Gone with the wind.

Reg Whitaker is Professor of Political Science at York University.

