Republicanism in Canada in the Reign of Elizabeth II: The Dog that Didn’t Bark
Youngest Canadians Strongest Supporters of Monarchy

by Dr. Stephen Phillips
Chair of the Department of Political Science, Langara College, Vancouver, BC, President, BC Political Studies Association

This article is based on a paper delivered to the Annual Meeting of the BC Political Studies Association, Vancouver, 2-3 May 2003.

Introduction

Although Canada is a constitutional monarchy, the institution of the Crown barely registers in the consciousness of most Canadians. 2002 proved to be an exception to that rule as Canadians celebrated the Queen’s Golden Jubilee. What might have been a relatively staid commemoration of Elizabeth II’s half-century of public service became a more poignant affair in the wake of the deaths, early in the year, and in quick succession, of Princess Margaret, the Queen’s younger sister, and the Queen Mother. The Jubilee year, including the Queen’s visit to Canada in October, 2002, afforded students of Canadian politics the opportunity to gauge the attitude of Canadians toward the monarchy and to observe the reception accorded to Her Majesty by the federal and provincial governments.

While surveys of public opinion appeared to show some growth over the preceding decade in support for the monarchy, most respondents, in all provinces except Quebe; continued to state a preference for retaining the Crown. Provincial premiers, for example, declared publicly their support for the monarchy, with the notable exception of Quebec Premier Bernard Landry. In a formal statement, the PQ Government announced it would be boycott ing the Queen’s Jubilee to protest Her Majesty’s role in the revision of the Constitution of 1982, a document whose legitimacy successions of Quebec governments have refused to acknowledge.

At the federal level, John Manley, the Deputy Prime Minister, caused a stir by endorsing the idea of a Canadian republic. While Manley had made similar comments before, he was roundly criticized, on grounds of bad manners, for repeating them during the Queen’s visit. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Chrétien’s position on the monarchy seemed to be one of pragmatic acceptance rather than of positive support. In 1997, in response to an earlier call by Manley, then Industry Minister, for the monarchy’s abolition, the Prime Minister had said: “I have enough [trouble] with the separatists of Quebec. I don’t want to have problems with the monarchists of Canada at this time.”

One year later, in 1998, officials in the Prime Minister’s Office broached the subject of abolishing the monarchy as a Millennium Project. The idea was swiftly dropped in the face of stern opposition from the political opposition and the Reform Party Official Opposition.

How sturdy is the monarchy in Canada and what are the prospects for its survival? The Reign of Elizabeth II of Canada came to an earlier call by Manley, then Industry Minister, for the monarchy’s abolition. Particularly relevant here is the process by which an indivisible Imperial Crown was superseded by a divisible Canadian Crown. That process began with the Imperial Conference of 1906 and concluded with the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, when for the first time Canada would have a monarch bearing the title “Queen of Canada.”

By surviving, and being itself transformed, by Canada’s transition from the status of a self-governing Dominion to that of a fully independent state, the Crown arguably pre-empted the rise of a republican movement in Canada of any significance. Secondly, the institutions of the Monarchy in Canada, while poorly understood by many Canadians (including more than a few public office-holders!), perform its political functions satisfactorily for the most part. This makes it difficult for republicans to build popular support for its abolition. Thirdly, there is reason to believe that the monarchy continues to have a profound, if understated, symbolic value to many English-speaking Canadians. In particular, the Crown is an important component of their sense of national identity and is associated with Canada’s historical development. Historically, of course, loyalty to the Crown signified resistance to cultural and political absorption by the United States.

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Republicanism in Canada

On the accession of Elizabeth II in 1952, the status of the monarchy in Canada had already been significantly transformed. Over the preceding quarter-century, Canada had acquired full political independence. And so Vernon Bogdanor puts it, “the concept of a single Crown uniting the members of the Commonwealth [had been] replaced by a compound crown.”

Nevertheless, as the new Queen began her reign, the monarch’s future cannot have seemed wholly uncontentious. Indeed, the drownings of Queen Victoria and the abdication of Edward VIII had each been of some concern and were, indeed, were broken or attenuated in this period, including the abolition of appeals to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in 1949, the appointment of Canadian-born Governor-Generals Sir John Mathieson in 1952, and the adoption of a new Canadian flag, sans Union Jack, in 1965. If the monarchy had been regarded as a British establishment, a Commonwealth of Nations, or, as a mere vestige of colonialism, it might have succumbed before long to the inexorable logic of nationalism and been replaced by a republican form of government. However, in the past half-century no organization moved to abolish the monarchy has emerged. Why not? Several reasons may be suggested.

First, while the Crown once embodied and symbolized Britain’s ultimate colonial authority over Canada, it manifestly ceased to do so with the passage of the Statute of Westminster in 1931. With the gradual emergence of a constitutionally separate Canadian Crown, the assertion of Canadian autonomy no longer required the severing of the monarchical link. Paradoxically, the legitimacy of the Crown was preserved, if not enhanced, as it was shorn of its Imperial powers and trappings. A similar process arguably had ensured the continuity of the Crown in 1848, when responsible government came to Nova Scotia and the Province of Canada. Likewise, in Britain itself the Reform Act of 1832 contributed to a decline in anti-monarchism in the 19th century — although it would revive briefly in the early 1870s — by curtailing the political power of the Monarch. Professor Frank Prochaska develops this theme in a recent book about the British monarchy in the late 19th century, and the particular recognition that “the monarchy would be more influential by keeping aloof from factional manoeuvring” while further enhancing the patronage of chartists, the Crown signified resistance to cultural and political absorption by the United States.

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Republicanism in Canada in the Reign of Elizabeth II

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To proponents of the monarchy, the unobtrusiveness of the Governor-General and the provincial lieutenants is a sign of their quiet effectiveness. Removed from the partisan fray, they are said to act as guardians of the constitution, determine prime ministers and premiers from abusing the privileges of Parliament or otherwise violating the unwritten, non-justiciable aspects of the constitution.

Critics of the Crown might be led to reply that the Governor General is the de facto head of state and is hardly above partisan politics. Not only is he or she nominated by the prime minister, but PMs have been in the habit of sending to Rideau Hall politicians affiliated with their own party since Pierre Trudeau nominated one of his former ministers, Jeanne Sauvé, to the vice-regal post in 1984. This criticism is conduced by many supporters of the Crown in Canada. Frank MacKinnon, for example, advocates a less partisan procedure for nominating the Governor General, as does the editorial board of the Globe and Mail. In any case, this question has not engaged the attention of the Canadian public to date and has not been taken up by any of the federal parties.

Vive la République!

To the extent that the monarchy has generated political controversy since the 1960s, Quebec neo-nationalism has been the principal driving force. The conservative nationalism of Honore Mercier, Henri Bourassa, and Maurice Duplessis had been broadly compatible with the institution of monarchy, if not with the foreign wars fought by the British Empire. In the 1960s, groups advocating independence for Quebec, from the RIN to the Parti Quebecois, were among the principal driving force. The conser- vative nationalism of Honore Mercier, Henri Bourassa, and Maurice Duplessis had been broadly compatible with the institution of monarchy, if not with the foreign wars fought by the British Empire. In the 1960s, groups advocating independence for Quebec, from the RIN to the Parti Quebecois, were among the principal driving force. The conser- vative nationalism of Honore Mercier, Henri Bourassa, and Maurice Duplessis had been broadly compatible with the institution of monarchy, if not with the foreign wars fought by the British Empire. In the 1960s, groups advocating independence for Quebec, from the RIN to the Parti Quebecois, were among the principal driving force. The conser- vative nationalism of Honore Mercier, Henri Bourassa, and Maurice Duplessis had been broadly compatible with the institution of monarchy, if not with the foreign wars fought by the British Empire. In the 1960s, groups advocating independence for Quebec, from the RIN to the Parti Quebecois, were among the principal driving force. The conser- vative nationalism of Honore Mercier, Henri Bourassa, and Maurice Duplessis had been broadly compatible with the institution of monarchy, if not with the foreign wars fought by the British Empire. In the 1960s, groups advocating independence for Quebec, from the RIN to the Parti Quebecois, were among the principal driving force. The conser-
The Republic of Canada...Republicanism in Canada...

The republicanism form of government. In the early 1970s, the PQ endorsed a presidential-parliamentary system for a post-independence Quebec, modelled on that of the Fifth Republic. The PLQ, in its Bilingualism Bill (Bill C-60), removed the abolition of the monarchy and the "repatriation" of the head of state. However, it did not consider the matter to be an urgent priority.

Republicanism by Stealth?

The response of the Federal Government to the provincial Governments in particular – to developments in Quebec reflected an apparent ambivalence toward the monarchy that is still evident today. On the one hand, Liberal Governments since the 1960s have sought to promote national unity by establishing pan-Canadian symbols and institutions designed to bridge the linguistic divide. The new flag, the Official Languages Act, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, underscored by the extensive opposition to the constitutional amendment proposals that comprised the constitutional debates of 1982 ended up with an elected head of state. Meanwhile, the federalization of the provinces, the proliferation of professional bodies in the country from the 1970s to the early 1990s, little was said about the monarchy. In any event, Federal officials evidently reckoned that the goal of maintaining national unity would be ill-served by opening a divisive debate on the future of the monarchy. Consequently, in spite of a deluge of constitutional reports and public support for constitutional changes, the country from the 1970s to the early 1990s, little was said about the monarchy. In 1972, the Molgot-MacGuan Joint Committee on the Constitution recommended no change in the status of the monarchy "[b]ecause of the state of divided opinion in Canada." In 1979, the Peep-Robarts Task Force reached a similar conclusion, while recommending that Lieutenant Governors should be appointed on the advice of the provincial premiers, not the PM. As to the alleged illogic of monarchy, the Christmas tree is no longer the unify-