

A return to the sea of red and white

by BROCK WEIR

By any measure of the sea of red and white before us, it was a remarkable return to form for Canada Day.

After more than two years of not being able to gather as we have always in the past, the arrival of what has been an elusive sense of normalcy was both palpable and comforting.

We were able to meet up and spend quality time with family and friends, take in some of the family-friendly programs our communities had to offer, all capped with dazzling fireworks displays.

Event planning of any kind has been fraught for the last two-and-a-half years.

Once a plan was finalized, it was a crap shoot whether the very next day new public health rules would be handed down by the Province, making months and months of preparation all for naught.

When things got a bit better, long-gestating plans would not have to be fully scrapped but retooled and rethought as gathering numbers were tweaked, expanded or contracted.

Then again, if all the hard work going into such events was able to stay in place, there was the ultimate question of whether or not the public would be ready to come out of their self-imposed bubbles and celebrate with their neighbours again.

Maybe that wasn't the ultimate question; for many people across Canada there was also the question of just what we would be celebrating come Canada Day.

The global pandemic upended our world, even in ways we couldn't begin to fathom before March of 2000. As we had more time in those early days away from whatever rat race we ran in between statutory holidays, it gave us, for better or worse, more time to focus on the issues of the day and what really mattered to us.

For many, it was an enlightening experience as the luxury of time afforded us the opportunity to, perhaps, try to put ourselves into the shoes of others and see the world from their perspective, one that was undoubtedly very different from our own.

But, in some respects, the inability to go about our regular routine created different pressures, some of which spilled over in ways they hadn't previously when we witnessed injustice to others or even the bristle of what we've come to know as our freedoms temporarily limited by obvious circumstances.

Injustices that had been sadly occurring and reoccurring for decades came into sharp new focus, as did the level of energy to go out, health restrictions be damned, and do something about it for your fellow human.

Conversely, what would have in eras past been seen as making a small sacrifice for the greater good was apparently too much to ask for as so many looked narrowly at a very broad-based issue in terms of how it might affect them and only them.

Things that were once safe ground for apolitical discussion turned out to be fraught with politically-charged pitfalls and the most innocuous-seeming circumstances turned out to be anything but, depending on where you were or who you were talking to.

As such, as we returned to a fully-fledged, restriction free, almost-normal-in-a-new-normal Canada Day, I was slightly trepidatious on what to expect on the day itself.

Don't get me wrong, I knew our communities would rise to the occasion and both celebrate what's great about Canada and contemplate some of the not-so-great aspects of where we are with a constructive eye to where we're going ? but it was anyone's guess at how the celebration would unfold as a whole across the country.

Thankfully, from this observational standpoint, it was more or less smooth sailing as revellers settled into the festivities.

From my personal perspective, a part in fostering a feeling of celebration and unity were the words of our Governor General Mary Simon.

As this country grapples with fully understanding and appreciating the terrible history of Indigenous-settler relations, I found it heartening to see the first Indigenous person to hold the office of Governor General deliver such a unifying and calming message to all Canadians ? without the political baggage that comes with being the leader of a government or party, serving or aspiring.

?Let me begin by thanking Canadians for their efforts during the pandemic,? she said. ?Thank you, Canada, for all your efforts during the pandemic, particularly the frontline workers who made a difference. They're a big part of the reason we can once again be out in the world and I applaud their work. I am delighted that we can once again see friends and family and show love for our country.

?As a country, we must remember that the spirit of celebration doesn't extend to everyone. This day may also be a reminder of what we have lost. Of course, we suffered tragic losses during the pandemic, and increasingly from climate disasters. And I've met with Indigenous peoples who continue to show strength and resilience but still grieve lost culture, languages and lives. This pain is renewed as they uncover locations of unmarked graves at residential schools. We must all work together to walk the road of reconciliation. It begins with understanding and respect.

?You may have heard me speak of 'ajuinnata' in the past year. It's a phrase in Inuktitut and important to Inuit. It means to never give up, to commit yourselves to action. The spirit of ajuinnata surrounds us. It's in the perseverance shown during the pandemic. In the tireless work in communities across Canada. And in the determination and hope of our youth to work toward building a Canada that lives up to our dreams.

?As we celebrate Canada Day, I want to encourage people in the same spirit to continue building an inclusive society, one where we can be who we are without judgement, where everyone belongs. Lead with kindness and compassion.?

By leading with those two core attributes, we just might be able to rediscover common ground that has become somewhat eroded over the past two-and-a-half years. Kindness and compassion, along with ajuinnata, will help us continue building the kind of country that we want, the one we've always aspired to be, and the one we've often told ourselves has been here all along.

Congratulations to all those behind the events that so aptly celebrated our country with a thoughtful and considered balance, as well as to all those who took part. It was nice to be back!