

Bill Rea ? Does anthem need changing?

There is a move afoot, prompted by some prominent Canadian women, to have the words to O Canada changed.

While I don't see a pressing need for any changes, and generally oppose making adjustments unless they are really needed, this is one of those occasions when I wouldn't have too much of a problem with the suggested changes.

The proposal calls for taking the words 'in all thy sons command' from the national anthem and replacing them with 'in all of us command,' in an effort to make it gender-neutral.

Granted, one could make a pretty good argument that the words, as they are now, aren't really gender-neutral. But does that justify changing the words to an anthem which, according to all accounts with which I'm familiar, has served us quite well for many years? The song has been around for more than 100 years, and has been sort of a de facto national anthem since the late 1930s. It officially became the national anthem in the 1980s.

It's now played as part of the opening ceremonies every school day. Actually, it was when I was a school kid, and then it stopped for some reason, around the early '70s. There was the odd occasion when I was in high school that O Canada would come on the public address system as part of the morning announcements. Since no one was expecting it, no one was really sure what to do. About 25 kids would slowly get to their feet with very tentative looks on their faces.

I think for a time, the playing of the national anthem followed the thinking of Archie Bunker, who once observed it was to be sung 'only on patriotic occasions, like ball games.'

This is not the first time in recent memory that we've heard calls to change these particular words, although I think it's clear that those calling for the alteration represent a rather small group. There has been no major demand from grass-roots Canadians, which leads me to believe there's really not much of a fuss at work here.

So I would have a problem with changing the words to satisfy a relatively small group. I don't like to see any established written word changed to bring it into conformity with contemporary thought. It begins to sound like something out of Nineteen Eighty-Four. For those of you who are not familiar with that work by George Orwell, the novel depicted a society in which newspapers and other published works were regularly altered, thus changing recorded history, to bring things in line with the current position of the authorities. As a newspaper man, the thought scares me.

What comes next? Do we start selectively changing the words of Shakespeare in the interests of political correctness? What's the point of having the English language if we're going to start doing that?

Besides, I like to think we already live in a pretty inclusive society, that is continually evolving. I believe that in order to see change in the future, we have to appreciate what came before and what kind of adjustments were made.

Indeed, from the reading I have done so far on this topic, the words 'in all thy sons command' were inserted as a tribute to the men who served in the First World War.

The people who sing the anthem today live, as I already noted, in a pretty inclusive society. They have brains, and thus can appreciate the inspiration that went into the words, and can understand that they were never meant to exclude anyone.

And if we want to deal with exclusionary words in O Canada, I have always had a problem with the line 'our home and native land.'

It seems to me those words exclude the immigrant community, and I would submit most Canadians don't have to go back many generations in their family tree to find some immigrants (in my case, I need only go to my father's parents).

Somewhat to my surprise, I learned that I wasn't the only one with this concern. I did a bit of reading before writing this piece, and learned there was an effort on the part of Toronto City council in 1990 to address the concern I raised, along with getting rid of the references to 'sons.' But nothing much has come of it.

That's the main reason why I suspect nothing is going to come of the current effort. That and the point I made above, that there really doesn't appear to be a majority of Canadians pushing for the change.

But even if the change does come about, It wouldn't upset me too much. That's because the words to O Canada have been changed before, including during my lifetime.

I was taught to sing O Canada by my Grade 1 teacher, almost 49 years ago. Up until then, we sang God Save the Queen at the start of every school day. Then came the day when we heard a class across the hall singing O Canada, and our teacher thought we should start doing that in the morning. We got a crash course in the lyrics, and the words 'God keep our land' were not part of the lesson. They have been subsequently added, and I can't think of anyone who's poorer for it.

There have been some unauthorized attempts to change the words to the anthem.

We can harken back to the late 1970s, when the late Roger Doucet worked his own words into the anthem.

Doucet was the man who used his incredible tenor pipes to belt out O Canada before Montreal Canadian games with an enthusiasm

that endeared him to much of the country. Yet there was the Habs game which he opened by inserting the words 'rights and liberty' into the anthem. I remember how I found out about that incident. It was by reading the banner headline in the following day's paper, 'Egad, Dief's mad.' Former prime minister John Diefenbaker was furious that the words of the anthem had been changed.

But the country survived, did it not?

The country will survive this debate too, although that's assuming the issue passes beyond the discussion stage, and I'm not yet will to offer odds on that happening.

Even if it does, I don't see it as a big deal. I think this is one of those classic cases, in which it's the thought that counts

