

Bill Rea ? Time healed the damage

Tomorrow (Friday) is a special day in these parts, but it's also a milestone of sorts.

Tomorrow (July 1) would have been the 55th birthday of the late Princess Diana.

Think back almost 19 years, to the night when Diana and her boyfriend Dodi Fayed were killed in a car wreck in Paris. The tragedy was a main talking point for weeks after that.

I remember being with a group of friends spending the holiday weekend at bed and breakfast establishment on Lake Ontario, near Kingston. It was late Saturday night, and the proprietor of the establishment, who generally left her tenants alone after a certain hour, came into the unit with the news she had just heard. That stopped the card games, and we all rushed to our cars to turn on the radios (there was no radio or TV in the unit, and it was a little too early for any of us to have brought laptops or made use of wifi). One of the couples in the group were originally from England. There was lots of interesting conversation in the hours and days that followed.

The topic dominated phone-in shows on the radio. I recall a story of a woman who phoned one of these shows, wondering what all the fuss was about. It later came out that some people did not appreciate her comments, and there were even threats launched against her.

There was naturally a lot of shock, over the fact she had died so suddenly and so young, at 36. In an instance of certain irony, Mother Theresa died the day before Diana's funeral, at 87. There were commentators who made the point that the grieving was much more profound for Diana, but might have been more deserved by Teresa. Some of them almost made it sound like a contest ? Who deserved to generate the most grief?

But we were also treated to discussions about the future of the monarchy in Britain, and by extension in Canada.

Although most of us tend to downplay it, the fact is Canada still has ties to the monarchy. If you doubt that conclusion, take a look at a \$20 bill sometime, not to mention the profile on most of the coins we carry around. And if there's a royal wedding taking place, a lot of people in this country will be up before dawn to watch it.

Yet at the time, there was heavy criticism for the way the Royal Family conducted themselves. Prince Charles came in for quite a trashing too. I remember being angry at the time, believing the heat was undeserved. But I also knew there were many who didn't agree with me. I think a lot of those feelings persist to this day.

I was talking to a woman from Ireland a couple of years ago, and she expressed, in no uncertain terms, how badly Charles had behaved at the time, and that the monarchy had outlived it's usefulness.

Since it was a social occasion, I resisted the occasion of saying anything that might result in an argument. It sometimes pays to bite one's tongue.

But I did state my believe that there is little desire, at least in this part of Canada, to do away with the monarchy. I have never heard of any serious local effort in that direction. As well, during federal elections, I am in the habit of asking local candidates a question about the topic. I sometimes encounter people who are not very enthused with the institution, but there's no desire to open up the can of worms that would result if they advocated doing away with it.

Perhaps things could have been handled differently when Diana was killed. But who are the rest of us to tell people how to handle deaths in the family. The Queen and Charles were criticized over the way they handled things, but Diana had left two sons behind, and their grieving took a certain amount of priority over optics. And people should have realized that at the time.

Things have changed a lot in the last 19 years.

Diana is still the focal point of a lot of happy memories, but not much of the acrimony that was evident at the time of her death. Granted, Diana went through a lot of ordeals that none of us deserve. On the other hand, I'm hard-pressed to determine who was responsible for her troubles.

I think the main trouble started when Diana first appeared on the scene, when she was just 19.

The real problem was no one, including Diana herself, her family, Charles, the Royal Family, the government of the day, Fleet Street or anyone else for that matter ever really appreciated the sensation she would become. Accordingly, Diana was not well-equipped to address the issue, and there was no one on hand to assist her. Charles and his family weren't really in a position to offer much help. They were used to the attention that Diana suddenly found herself exposed to.

Here's a trivia question that I predict a lot of people will get wrong.

Prior to Diana, when was the last time a woman had married that close to the British throne?

Some of you were probably quick to cite 1923, when then Prince Albert married Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, who most of us remember as the Queen Mother, and you would have been wrong. Albert was the second son of a reigning king, with a healthy older brother.

No one ever thought this guy would be king. In other words, she didn't marry that close to the throne.

You have to go back a lot further in time, like to 1893, when then Prince George wed Mary of Teck. The couple, in time, became George V and Queen Mary. Those were the days before mass media and paparazzi, when people were generally willing to show more respect to other people, especially when it came to their privacy.

What I think it boils down to is no one in the Royal Family or Buckingham Palace knew how to deal with the situation and all the attention Diana received, leaving Diana to deal with things on her own.

Like I stated, a lot has changed, and Diana's daughter-in-law, Kate Middleton, has benefitted from it.

The ability to change with times and adapt I think is the main reason why the monarchy is still around and flourishing.

You don't hear many calls to get rid of the institution these days. I'm sure there are some who would like to see it done away with, but I think their numbers are small, and not likely to increase much in the foreseeable future.

I think most people have come to realize that what ever damage was done at the time of Diana's death has been repaired, and the world has moved on. There were probably many people who would have sworn some 19 years ago that would be impossible. From my point of view, I never doubted it.

