

Carving out the time to reflect, grieve and move forward

Brock's Banter

By Brock Weir

Statutory holidays can be a tricky business.

While people generally relish the opportunity for a day off from the daily grind, some bemoan the negative impact closing one's doors for a day or two here and there can have on the bottom line on business.

It all depends on the holiday, however, as some seem to have a bit more weight than others.

Boxing Day, for instance, although completely overtaken by American Black Friday-style commercialism these days, is something Canadians take seriously, if only as a respite from the hustle and bustle that comes with Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and, in the pre-COVID days, the seemingly never-ending social whirl that leads up to the end of December.

Thanksgiving is, so far, comparatively free of the commercialism creeping over the border (with the exception of Cyber Monday) although the holiday's origins in this country are continually lost in the unlikely bucolic traditions that have become steeped, even falsely, in the American observance. Yet, we know it is a time for family, food and fun in the fall.

We know what to expect, we look forward to it, and more likely than not, there are traditions individual to each family that are all but unavoidable due to the simple fact they have always been done.

Then, there are the statutory holidays for which their purpose has been kept deliberately vague or overtaken by something completely different.

Civic Holiday is celebrated across most of the country in different ways ? but just what exactly are we celebrating? Some extra time off at the height of summer is always welcome, but in British Columbia, it's known by the highly creative name of British Columbia Day, a trend that is also shared by Saskatchewan and New Brunswick. In Alberta, it is Heritage Day while here in Ontario it is known by any number of things. While ?Civic Holiday? usually wins the day, depending on where you are in Ontario, it can be known as Simcoe Day in honour of Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe, Colonel By Day in honour of an early developer of our nation's capital and the list goes on.

Victoria Day, as the name suggests, is a celebration of Queen Victoria, the first monarch of a post-Confederation Canada, but it is also the official Canadian birthday of the Sovereign of the day. Yet, how many of us stop on that May Monday every year to raise a glass to Victoria or Elizabeth II? Some might, sure, but for most people it is the unofficial start of summer and has gained the unfortunate nickname of ?May Two-Four? weekend.

Holidays that are not rooted in faith or Remembrance seem to be observed with appropriate solemnity. But just as many holidays are used as a time to party, others for family and fellowship, to simply have the day off, or, if you're in business, to drive up sales.

This week, however, we have the chance to do something with a bit more meaning: stopping on Thursday, September 30, for National Day of Truth and Reconciliation.

Originally Orange Shirt Day, National Truth & Reconciliation Day was recognized by the Federal Government earlier this year after the remains of 215 Indigenous children were discovered in unmarked graves on lands associated with the Kamloops Residential School.

Although making the day a holiday was fast-tracked following this grisly discovery, the first of many thousands of remains to have been discovered since then, it was not a new idea; a statutory holiday to allow Canadians to reflect on and never forget the tragic legacy of residential schools was one of the 94 Calls to Action to come out of the National Truth & Reconciliation Commission's report.

“We call upon the federal government, in collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal organizations, and the arts community, to develop a reconciliation framework for Canadian Heritage and Commemoration. This would include, but not limited to, establish as a statutory holiday, a National Day for Truth & Reconciliation to honour Survivors, their families, and communities, and ensure that public commemoration of the history and legacy of residential schools remains a vital component to the reconciliation process,” the report set out with little room for interpretation.

Although the day has been established at the Federal level, not all Provinces have followed suit in making this a holiday. The Government of Ontario confirmed earlier this month that Thursday, September 30, would not be a public holiday “at least this year.

The decision in and of itself has sparked further calls to action.

“Six Nations Grand River is most disappointed that the Government of Ontario has decided not to observe National Truth & Reconciliation Day by marking September 30 as a statutory holiday,” said Chief Mark B. Hill in an open letter to Premier Ford last week. “While you and many other provincial officials have expressed your commitment to strengthening relationships with First Nations Communities, this upcoming statutory holiday is an important symbol indicating a commitment to practical action.

“This year has been difficult on everyone, but particularly so for the Indigenous communities whose old wounds were reopened upon the discovery of their lost children's remains. Canada's history has been marred by the dark legacy of governmental theft of children. Forcefully removing children from their parents and communities to assimilate them to Government's culture and values was and remains an abominable crime. It is not enough that leaders give a few remarks on occasion, only to let pass more formal opportunities to officially acknowledge where we've come from and where we need to go.”

Chief Hill concludes that now is the time for Ontario to join British Columbia and the Northwest Territories to “lead other provinces, in full, official commemoration of this day.”

I quite agree with the leader of Six Nations of the Grand River.

National Truth and Reconciliation Day will be a difficult, but poignant observance, one which will undoubtedly continue to raise awareness of darker, more tragic chapters of our recent past and plant further seeds for change. It should be a day where we have the ability to get out of our offices, schools and indeed our routines to learn, grieve and heal collectively.

It is too late for Ontario to change its decision to have any meaningful impact this year, but 2022 can be a very different story “and I'm just thankful so many municipalities across Ontario, along with non-profits and cultural groups have stepped up to fill the vacuum.