

Changing of the Guard ? Welcome or Otherwise

By **BROCK WEIR**

Whether we want it or not, Canada often seems behind the trend in many cases compared to our neighbours, and it takes a year or two to catch up. Again, whether we like it or not.

Pierre Trudeau once famously said of the relationship between North America's two largest nations, "Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if you can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt."

This is, I believe one of the contributing factors to what felt, at least to me, a vague sense of unease in this country following events in another on January 6. Perhaps it was because what we saw on our screens that day was unlike anything we have seen before. Perhaps it was the idea that if this is the kind of thing that is fermenting in the States, it is only going to be a matter of time before we get our first whiff.

And then things got eerily quiet once the now-former President of the United States was booted from his virtual bully pulpit, one from which he regularly bombarded us with pithy Tweets that had real and immediate consequences not only on the United States but the world writ large.

It was the beginning of the end of the end.

We knew that change was in the air, but, if the last four years have taught us something, it is that anything can happen. So, the rest of us had no choice but to sit back and see how it would all unfold.

As it ultimately unspooled this past Wednesday, the sense of relief was palpable for so many. People were allowing themselves to become unbraced, settling into a welcome return to some degree of normalcy.

"Over the centuries through storm and strife, in peace and war, we have come so far. But we still have far to go. We will press forward with speed and urgency, for we have much to do in this winter of peril and possibility," said President Biden on January 20. "Much to repair. Much to restore. Much to heal. Much to build and much to gain."

"To overcome these challenges, to restore the soul and to secure the future of America, requires more than words. It requires the most elusive of things in a democracy: unity."

Nevertheless, hearing these words, the acknowledgement of these difficult and simple truths that have been recognized the world over in recent years with one terribly noticeable exception, were a balm for the soul after the bombardment. It left this writer feeling hopeful, but also wondering how this undoubted change of guard would impact the country we call home.

I didn't, however, anticipate a change of our own guard to be so swift ? albeit in very different circumstances.

Less than 24 hours after the newly minted American President and First Lady spent their first night in the White House, someone else was changing house ? this time Julie Payette as she took the extraordinary step of resigning as Governor General following a damning report into alleged workplace harassment at Rideau Hall.

"Everyone has the right to a healthy and safe work environment, at all times, and under all circumstances," said Ms. Payette. "It appears this was not always the case at the Office of the Secretary to the Governor General. Tensions have arisen at Rideau Hall over the past few months and for that, I am sorry."

?I am a strong believer in the principles of natural justice, due process and the rule of law, and that these principles apply to all equally. Notwithstanding, in respect for the integrity of my vice-regal Office and for the good of our country and of our democratic institutions, I have come to the conclusion that a new Governor General should be appointed. Canadians deserve stability in these uncertain times.?

If you have any interest in the post of the Queen's representative in Canada, a person in a position near the very pinnacle of our Constitutional structure, the writing was already on the wall for Ms. Payette. Allegations were not letting up and she was coming under increased scrutiny in her day-to-day carrying out of her constitutional duties.

While Ms. Payette should be commended for finding ways to inspire younger Canadians in the myriad fields of STEM, with a particular emphasis on that first S of 'science?', it was clear she was not an ideal pick. It was also clear that she had not been properly vetted ? or even briefed ? by the Federal Government and particularly Prime Minister Trudeau in marked contrast to the non-partisan review panel instituted by Stephen Harper during his tenure. This expert panel resulted in the appointment of David Johnston to a remarkable tenure at Rideau Hall, one which re-engaged and re-connected Canadians of all backgrounds.

Now, the difficult task will begin to find a replacement.

Although the Federal Government and PMO are being frustratingly vague on how any potential candidates will be vetted, selected or prepared to fill the void, this is a chance to make significant repairs to an office that has become unfortunately and unnecessarily battered since Mr. Johnston left office in 2017.

To echo the words of Mr. Biden, who will undoubtedly be greeted by the next Governor General on his inaugural visit to this country as Head of State, it is a chance to repair, restore, heal, build and gain ? even from allegedly self-inflicted wounds.

Whoever is ultimately appointed by The Queen will be in an unenviable position but, if their appointment is made in a non-partisan way as when Harper was tasked with finding someone to succeed Michaëlle Jean, identifying the best fit for the job, and someone who actually embraces what the job entails and represents, we will be well on that road.

To end this column on a positive note, I just want to say that after the last few years how refreshing it was to see a Head of State or, in Canada's case, the official representative of our Head of State, recognize, even late in the game, that the office they hold is greater than the individual and know when it is time to make an exit for the good of their country and democracy.