

Reflections on Mary Simon

by BROCK WEIR

When push comes to shove, I think it's safe to say that Canadians are proud of our country.

Sure, there are those who look to our neighbours to the south for their flashy brand of patriotism as somehow superior to our own quiet homegrown pride ? I can't count the number of times I heard the co-opted commercial catch phrase ?only in Canada? delivered with something of a dismissive snort.

Then there are others who like to drone on and on (and on) about how Canada is allegedly ?broken? when, if you really want to get down to brass tacks, it's only broken because the person you want to ride in on a proverbial white charger to apparently save the day has faced more than a few stumbles coming out of the starting block.

There are more still who subscribe to a certain brand of Canadian pride that is defined by what we aren't rather than what we are. There's a value to that, don't get me wrong, particularly when put up against those aforementioned southern neighbours, but, personally speaking, I'd rather take pride in what we are than what we are not.

One of the facets of Canada I hold particularly close to my heart is our system of government ? that is the system itself, not the individuals who may or may not hold office at any given point. It's a system that has served the country well and stood the test of time, and a key component of that is the role of the Canadian Crown.

I've taken my fair share of jibes over the years for my enthusiasm for the institution. Yes, there are valid arguments for and against maintaining it in this country, but, in my view, it's hard to argue with results.

Many Canadians have questioned the Crown's relevance over the years. Heck, its status has been a question since Confederation in 1867, but its value has certainly been demonstrated especially in the last couple of years as we face down threats to our independence and very existence.

Take, for instance, multiple sources reporting that not only did the incumbent President of the United States not know King Charles III is Canada's Head of State, but that the realization of that very basic fact is apparently one of the few reasons ?51st State? rhetoric has died down.

This was demonstrated a year ago this month when the King opened Parliament, the first time the sovereign had done so since 1977, and as recently as last week when the King wasted no opportunity to remind his hosts at the White House of this truth, regardless of the fact he was acting in his capacity as Head of State of the United Kingdom at the time.

It is also being demonstrated this week with the appointment on Tuesday of celebrated jurist and human rights advocate Louise Arbour as Canada's Governor General-designate, succeeding the history-making tenure of Mary Simon as the King's representative here at home.

Mary Simon was appointed to the role in 2021, picking up from the brief and rather disastrous tenure of astronaut Julie Payette, whose resignation led to many Canadians to question the value of maintaining role in our governmental hierarchy when the office holder seemed to have little idea ? or regard for ? the role she accepted.

An Inuk, Simon has the distinction of being the first Indigenous Governor General in our nearly 160-year history of this country ? a distinction that is much more than just a historical footnote.

As it became clear over the last week or so that Simon's time at Rideau Hall was coming to an end ? a Governor General's term has

typically been about five years, give or take a year or two ? it seems as though Simon's achievements in office have taken a backseat to the fact that she's not fluent in French.

Now, I'm not discounting the importance of the person representing the Crown in Canada being able to speak both official languages. In fact, it's a qualification more important for a Governor General than an Air Canada honcho. But, as Simon's husband Whit Fraser retorted early on in his wife's term, Simon is bilingual ? and how many of her critics can fluently speak an Indigenous language? It's not in the job description, but it certainly doesn't hurt!

The former Prime Minister was criticized for appointing a person with minimal knowledge of the French language to the post, but, in my view, it was the right appointment for the right moment, an important step in our collective road to Truth & Reconciliation and, in Simon, an invaluable path through whom we had ? and continue to have ? an important national conversation.

?What I value most about my upbringing was my parents teaching my siblings and I how to live in two worlds: the Inuit world and the non-Inuit southern world,? said Simon in her installation speech. ?This foundation of core values has both served and shaped me throughout my life and I believe helped me get to the important turning point as a young girl when I stopped being afraid. It took time before I gained the self-confidence to assert myself and my beliefs in a non-Indigenous world, but when I came to understand that my voice had power and that others were looking to me to be their voice, I was able to let go of my fear?.

?I have always viewed Canada as a metaphor for a family. As members of our large and diverse Canadian family, we have to replace the hurt with hope and find the grace and humility to stand together and move towards a more just and equitable future?. Since the publication of the Truth & Reconciliation Report six years ago, we have learned as a country that we need to learn the real history of Canada. Embracing this truth makes us stronger as a nation, unites Canadian society and teaches our kids that we must always do our best, especially when it's hard?.

?Reconciliation is a way of life and requires work every day. Reconciliation is getting to know one another. Reconciliation invites us to get to know one another. As stated in the Truth & Reconciliation Commission Report, reconciliation must support Aboriginal peoples as they heal from destructive legacies of colonization that have wreaked such havoc in their lives. We are reminded daily that even though diversity is a core Canadian value, our country must do more to respect all languages, cultures, ethnicities, religions, and ways of living. As Governor-General, I will embody our nation's commitment to diversity and acceptance.?

In that, I think Mary Simon can look back with pride over her time as Canada's Governor-General and with the sense of an accomplished mission.

Canadians, in turn, can take pride in the fact that Mary Simon succeeded in her mandate, represented Canadians abroad admirably.

And further pride can be found in the fact she is set to be succeeded by another eminent Canadian with a distinguished career, a proven track record, and a commitment to values so many of us hold close to our hearts.