

They desire a better country

by BROCK WEIR

Who are we as Canadians?

It might seem like a simple question at first blush, but the more one thinks about it ? and the more we think about it as a collective ? the more complex a question it becomes.

Several years ago, while one of our main national parties was in the middle of a contentious leadership race, a middle-of-the-pack contender for the party's top job suggested that all those looking to secure Canadian citizenship should not only pass the regular questions on a citizenship test ? such as those on our structure of government, geography, and the responsibilities that go along with citizenship ? but also a test to affirm they share Canadian values.

Again, it seemed like a simple sentiment at the outset, but the deeper people delved into the merits of such a test, or an evaluation at the very least, the more complex, contentious, and ultimately nonsensical the suggestion seemed.

Sure, we as Canadians, have many things in common from coast to coast to coast, but in a Confederation like ours, the devil is truly in the details. What might be a core value for a citizen of Prince Edward Island, for example, might be wildly different from a citizen of Alberta. And this was always the case well before Wild Rose Country renewed their sabre-rattling efforts to divorce the rest of us for an uncertain future.

What it means to be Canadian, and the very idea of Canada itself, has become more overtly complex in recent years, a fact that can be attributed to many factors, including heritage, geography, resources, and sometimes an appreciation of what we aren't rather than what we are.

Around this time of year, I almost invariably find myself thinking back to 1992, when Canada was celebrating its 125th anniversary as a nation.

While I wasn't born in time enough to experience what appears to be a near-ecstatic level of patriotism when Canada celebrated its centennial in nation-building projects, Expo 67, and so much more ? I've had to content myself with second-hand thrills through the memories and memorabilia my parents have shared with me ? 1992 comes pretty darn close through my own then-youthful lens.

My elementary school in Newmarket embraced the anniversary wholeheartedly. In fact, much of the lessons and activities Prince Charles Public School offered that year seemed tailor-made to give students ? at least those of us in the younger grades ? a complete immersion in what was considered Canadian culture at the time.

In this environment, not unlike Ontario, Canada was essentially ours to discover.

We had a full menu of electives we could enjoy and there were far too many offerings to sample each and every one. We had to be a bit judicious in what we wanted to fit in. Where to start? Well, our once ubiquitous Heritage Minutes on television gave me a few ideas on where I wanted to start.

I can't, of course, remember every single option that was available to us, but they offered walking tours of Toronto landmarks ? hey, to students living in the ?burbs, that was a glamorous, exotic, hot-ticket elective ? as was a stroll to our local museum to learn about seminal moments in Canadian history that could be traced back to Newmarket in one way or another. There were crafting workshops designed to give us the fundamentals of Laura Secord and what she accomplished during the War of 1812 (some of my peers were quite surprised she was not, in fact, a chocolatier), an afternoon learning some of Canada's quirkier folk songs (although, in retrospect, most of these were decidedly maritime numbers), a chance to sample some of our national dishes (poutine hadn't really

hit yet in these parts, if memory serves), and an opportunity to pour out some tempera paint and learn the basics of what was presented to us as Indigenous art.

It was a very European-centric view of what it meant to be Canadian 33 years ago, including the art session. It certainly was not led by an Indigenous instructor and to our sensibilities some three decades on, that was not the appropriate approach to take in imparting the characteristics of such traditional art forms.

We, as students, were not yet in a position to know better, yet our teachers were ? but, as loath as I am to say about a time period in which I grew up purely due to vanity, it was a different time.

A quarter century on from Canada 125 came Canada 150, an anniversary that was significantly more muted by comparison for many reasons, not the least of which was the fact we are (and were) a nation that was coming to grips on some hard truths about our heritage.

The more we learned, the more that came to light, the more we were forced to challenge some of the idyllic, peaceful, and bucolic notions that were sold to us early on.

It was an uncomfortable process for some, but necessary, and I think we're collectively stronger for it.

But even today there's still much we have to do.

Last week, Premier Ford sparked a controversy when, in a press conference on Bill 5 and its impact on First Nations, he said he told his Minister of Indigenous Affairs, ?When I first came into office [I said] treat them well, give them what they want, but there is going to be a point where you can't just keep coming hat in hand all the time to the government. You have to be able to take care of yourselves.?

It didn't take long for the Premier to apologize for his remarks, unfortunately made just days before National Indigenous People's Day, an apology which Grand Council Chief Linda Debassinge said felt sincere.

It was something of a tempest in a tea pot, but, in many ways, it was indicative that we, as a nation, still have to travel a fair bit of road ahead.

There is a misconception I've never truly understood that recognizing our weaknesses is a weakness in itself. To my mind, recognizing our respective weaknesses ? whether as individuals or as a collective ? is a really a show of strength as it identifies areas in need of improvement and catalyses us to get off our duffs and do something about it.

It's there, in my view, where one of Canada's main strengths lies: our ability to grow and move forward together, always striving to improve and build upon who we are. It's no accident that the motto of the Order of Canada is ?Desiderantes meliorem patriam? ? or, ?They desire a better country.?

We all do, and it's an objective we all have a duty to work towards.

We're going into this Canada Day riding a wave of ?Elbows Up? patriotism as we look to a future of strength amid uncertainty. But out of this uncertainty comes opportunity ? not only to redefine ourselves on the world stage, but here at home, too, as we look to bolster our domestic bonds in the face of pressures from outside.

Let's take advantage of it.