

When the world is watching

by BROCK WEIR

The World Cup is now in full swing and citizens of the world have descended upon Toronto, Vancouver, and a host of other cities throughout the United States and Mexico to watch the so-called 'Beautiful Game' unfold and many of whom are viewing the sport in a country they've never experienced.

While some visitors might be focused strictly on game play, it's a prime opportunity to explore a city, its cultures, and its context within a wider Canadian and international lens.

It's a great chance for a city, region, province and nation to put its collective best feet forward not only to make the visitor experience, and all the economic benefits it can bring, all it can be, but to showcase the best of ourselves on the international stage.

The first game held in Canada last week offered something of an appetizer, showcasing talents as varied as Will Arnett and Alanis Morissette to Canadians and visitors alike, but it was also a bite of how we might want to project ourselves internationally.

This chance was always evident, but it seems to have been particularly embraced by the City of Toronto at crunch time when, with just a week or two to go before the big opening, the municipality went into overdrive to make sure Toronto was ready to welcome the world.

When our country prepares to host such a wide-reaching international affair like the World Cup, even in part, it's usually an opportunity to indulge in some introspection as well on just what we want to offer on what it means to be Canadian and the values that hold us together as a nation.

It doesn't even have to be tied to any particular event after all, Molson's iconic 'Joe Canada' commercial, one that spawned countless imitators but nary a single duplicator more than 25 years ago, was more or less a just-because reminder.

Sometimes we even get a reminder from the outside looking in.

At the start of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, for instance, U.S. news anchor Tom Brokaw offered his own perspective on Canada through a decidedly American lens.

'Canada and the United States share another unique quality: they are immigrant nations, destinations for people around the world who long for political freedoms, economic opportunity and a tradition of compassion,' he said.

In a section of Brokaw's segment that has, perhaps, not aged as well as it could've, he highlighted the importance of our economic relationship and the sheer volume of cross-border trade and the sheer volume of cross-border travel. That might be worth a revision, but I digress?

He touched upon some of the better-worn tropes of Canada as well, including the sub-zero north, apparent propensity for politeness, our role in the First and Second World Wars including a reminder that we were in both theatres before our American cousins joined us as well as in the Iran Hostage Crisis and support in the aftermath of 9/11.

'In the long history of sovereign neighbours, there never has been a relationship as close, productive and peaceful as the U.S. and Canada,' said Brokaw before the Opening Ceremonies began. 'Speaking before the Canadian Parliament, President Kennedy summarized the relationship this way, 'Geography has made us neighbours. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies.'

'Those who nature so joined together,' said Kennedy, 'Let no man put asunder.'

While one man has done his utmost to put this special relationship asunder in the sixteen years since Vancouver hosted the Olympics, the gist of Brokaw's message remains a potent reminder not just of who we are perhaps were, in some elements but how the identity we put forward is interpreted by others.

Last week, however, we had another reminder the most potent we've had in many years when former Supreme Court Justice Louise Arbour was sworn in as Canada's latest Governor General in a spectacular ceremony with plenty of pomp and pageantry held in Ottawa on Monday, June 8.

An internationally-recognized jurist who has been an advocate for so many people around the world, it was interesting to hear the King's new representative expand on what being Canadian means to her through a very worldly lens and, in my opinion, get right to the heart of the matter.

'As Canadians, we have the extraordinary privilege of living in a mature democracy,' said the newly-minted Governor-General. 'We benefit from strong institutions that allow different views to be expressed. We must continue to protect the public space in which our national debates take place, from schools and universities, to the media, to political parties, unions and civil society organizations, from theatres, concert halls and museums, to courtrooms and the floors of our legislative assemblies.

'The peaceful management of our differences is nowhere better expressed than in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Charter guarantees that our cherished individual rights are subject only to the reasonable limits that are necessary for life in a free and peaceful democracy. This is what it means to live under the rule of law. In an open society like ours, the purpose of law is not to restrain, but to construct a greater freedom for all.

'We have a constitutional and cultural framework that allows us to imagine, to explore, to innovate, and to experiment. Our humour is grounded in self-deprecation. We believe in leading as a team. We do not mistake humility for weakness, nor do we measure a person's worth by the thickness of their wallet. We don't think we are perfect, but we believe we are pretty well on the way there. We have a remarkable capacity to pause, to examine our failures and to learn from them. And, when we do, we seek to understand, not just to blame, and we know that we're not yet doing enough not enough for each other, let alone for the billions around the world who look at us with justifiable envy'.

'At the dawn of my new role, I am aware of the privilege granted to me to meet Canadians from all over the country and to discover the richness of ideas and ideals that drive them. I am preparing to be surprised and to be confronted with my own stereotypes and unconscious biases'. When I am called to represent Canada abroad or to welcome foreign dignitaries in our country, it is the richness of Canadian voice that I intend to carry. In particular, I hope to be able to embody every day the spirit of empathy that is at the heart of our great reconciliation project. Together, we can harness our extraordinary resources, the breadth of our talent, our collective know-how, and our boundless imagination. The world is watching us, not to copy everything we do, but to draw inspiration from a country striving to embrace the future with greater security, prosperity, and dignity for all.'

The world is indeed watching Canada in this moment and if the individuals here from all parts of the world to catch some soccer return home with this takeaway about Canada and Canadians, that is a win in itself and pretty damn accurate, in my book.