

It’s Time to Shed the Last Vestiges of Colonialism

By Mandy Pipher

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My fellow Canadians, now that the various 150th celebrations and controversies are behind us, I would like to ask one of our favourite questions: what is a Canadian?

Of the many answers to that question, not one, if we are being at all serious, is “British.” Certainly some of us have British ancestors, and no doubt some have emigrated from the U.K., but many also have ancestors from China and Ghana and Somalia and Poland and just about every other country on Earth.

People of a wide variety of ancestries and immigration histories have built the modern state that we call Canada, and the only groups that can truly claim rights to this land are Indigenous peoples. Any Canadian who is not Indigenous has come from somewhere else; at this point in history, Britain is just one of those places.

Yet we cling to the increasingly ludicrous symbolic remnants of the British Empire. We have Lieutenant-Governors in the provinces and a Governor-General in Ottawa — representatives of the British Monarchy.

The Queen of England looks at us one-eyed from every coin that passes through our hands. The Queen of England! Why? What connection do we have to that archaic institution beyond a history of colonization that few of us would endorse today?

True reconciliation with Indigenous peoples means substantial changes in laws and financial commitments, but symbolic choices matter too. How can Canada claim to be moving forward with reparations to Indigenous communities when the currency we trade in is etched with the face of the colonial power that took their land and killed their people?

How can we struggle forward to define “Canada” while still hesitantly holding the hand of a distant and historically tyrannical parent we have well outgrown?

Not long ago, we used our historical connection to England to separate ourselves from Americans. With their cultural ascendancy, shared language, and military might, they seemed a larger threat to our identity. But we are past that now. We know that we are not American; the world knows that we are not American. Our cultural landscape, our political debates, our national struggles, our approaches to problems, are, by and large, palpably different.

Our language is even becoming distinct: linguists have tracked changes in Canadian accents and dialects, and that growing distinctiveness has been documented in specifically Canadian dictionaries.

No, we are definitively not American, and we are not British. Even if some Canadians still feel British, that sense of connection is unrequited. The British feel no special connection to us. Their government treats us no differently than the U.S. or any other ally.

As a Canadian, my British visa application to study in England was about 15 pages and cost $1,000 — the same as an American. The British consulate in Toronto doesn’t even process visas for Canadians; they are sent through New York. My bank wouldn’t provide the financial documents requested by the British Home Office; standard in England, they were unknown here in Canada, and the authority of the U.K. meant nothing.

“*Sorry, Ms Pipher*,” they said, “*this is a Canadian bank*.”

My administrative woes are not the point; I share them as a glimpse into how much Canadian and British economic, political, and cultural systems have diverged. As Canadians, we are not treated like we belong in England, any more than Americans or Italians; the same is true of other Commonwealth citizens.

The British charge us as much as the Americans to live in their country, and they give us an equally hard time at the border. As far as Britain is concerned, in every way that counts, we are foreigners.

So what are we holding on to? If we were to divest ourselves of our dubious connection with the British Monarchy, we could still follow the outfits and antics of the Royal Family as much as we follow the Kardashians — which, let’s face it, is all the Windsors are at this point: classier, state-funded Kardashians.

As Canada looks towards the next 150 years, we need to decide if we will — through fear or inertia or misplaced nostalgia — continue to cling to the faded hand of colonial empire.

If we do, we might miss our opportunity to be a different kind of global power: one which honestly and painfully continues to reflect on what it wants to be — and acts accordingly.

*Mandy Pipher is a freelance writer currently pursuing her PhD in English Language at the University of Toronto. Her website is www.mandypipher.com*

Bibliography:

1. Pipher, Mandy. "It's Time to Shed the Last Vestiges of Colonialism." Thestar.com. July 02, 2017. Accessed July 12, 2018. https://bit.ly/2uhEpsK.

Comprehension and Analysis Questions:

1. How can a reader tell this an op-ed (opinion editorial) piece rather than a news report?

2. How has the British monarchy served and shaped Canada?

3. Why does Mandy Pipher believe it is now time for Canada to severe ties with the monarchy?

4. How would a post-monarchy Canada be different from Canada today?