

BROCK'S BANTER: In all of us command?

By Brock Weir

Some readers will remember all too well Canada's flag wars of the early 1960s as Liberal Prime Minister ? and hometown boy ? Lester B. Pearson proposed changing the Red Ensign to a flag that was, in his view, uniquely Canadian.

In the opposing corner was former Progressive Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, who was a staunch proponent of the status quo.

The debate was heated, the proposed changes and mock-ups were endless and, in the end, over 51 years ago, we got our now iconic red maple leaf. In the end, it was a flag neither Pearson nor Diefenbaker had in mind, but a relatively happy medium. If your name wasn't Diefenbaker.

The flag was ultimately embraced and while the maple leaf might be forever on our flag, ?The Maple Leaf Forever? certainly took a beating.

Written by Alexander Muir around the time of Confederation it, alongside the later entry, O Canada, was widely viewed as one of Canada's unofficial anthems, often sung alongside the de facto official national anthem, God Save The Queen/King.

By late 1970s, Canada was still without an official national anthem to call its own. God Save the Queen was still our official theme song, along with several other nations, and the time came to choose something a bit unique.

The Maple Leaf Forever, which begins with the memorable line ?In days of yore, from Britain's shore??, heralding Great Britain's victory over France on the Plains of Abraham, along with subsequent victories over the Americans in the War of 1812, was probably not the ideal choice for national unity when the flames of separatism were still hot in Quebec. So, O Canada it was ? and O Canada it remains.

Over the past few years, our National Anthem, whether you like it or not (full disclosure: I happen to think the Maple Leaf Forever, despite its potentially divisive lyrics, is a bit more of a toe-tapper), has taken a beating.

Canadian sports fans were in a lather on Sunday and well into Monday following Saturday's Raptors game against the Miami Heat when then the visiting Dwayne Wade was spotted shooting hoops while O Canada was played.

Raptors fans immediately turned to social media to blast the guard, accusing him of being disrespectful to the country, an accusation which he denied, citing a ?misunderstanding.?

His mea culpa did nothing to quell fans' anger about a national anthem which was already bruised in Ottawa earlier in the week.

Liberal MP Mauril Belanger took another stab at changing O Canada to gender neutral lyrics, proposing the line ?in all thy sons command? to ?in all of us command?, a bill which was seconded by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leona Alleslev.

Diagnosed last year with ALS, subsequently losing his speech, it was moving to see Mr. Belanger come into the House to make his pitch.

?Changing only two words gives Canada an inclusive anthem that respects what we were and what we have become as a country,? he contended.

Conservative MPs, however, disagreed and stated their reasons, with some arguing it was a pandering move and could open the floodgates to stripping away some of our national symbols.

Some Liberals branded the opposition as ?shameful?, forgetting the lather they worked themselves into in 2010 when Stephen Harper suggested just such a change in that year's Throne Speech, arguing it was simply a ?distraction? from the headier proposals delivered by the Governor General.

History also seems to be a bit forgetful suggesting gender neutral lyrics would be a major step forward, disregarding the fact that the English version of O Canada started off as gender neutral, with the line of contention starting off life as ?thou dost in us command? before being changed nearly 50 years after the fact.

Aside from the alternative wording making little to no sense within the context of the wider national anthem, I question the point of stripping it down and making the national anthem, to borrow a phrase used so often by so many politicians who want to leave the door open to future change without having to be brave and make a change themselves, ?a living document.?

A gender neutral anthem is an ideal, of course, but if our leaders are questioning this one line, where are some of our nation's political correctness warriors clamouring for all references to God be removed for phrases more reflective of our multicultural society which believes in a single God, multiple Gods, or no God at all?

Curious about this, I posed this very question on social media on Saturday afternoon and received some interesting responses from many York Region residents, as well as from other parts of the country.

?In my personal view, I think our anthem can continue to evolve with our country and the times and it can be done without disrespect to its origins,? said one Aurora woman kicking off a very respectful and well-reasoned debate. ?Inclusivity is something important to a vast number of Canadians who are and aren't ?sons' and who are and aren't faithfuls of the Christian God. I love our anthem as it is, I really do, and I believe it will be just as awesome with an update.?

Taking the opposite viewpoint was a former member of Aurora Council: ?There is nothing wrong with honouring the traditional version for its historical significance. We can still evolve as a county and, as people, without leaving our long-standing practices behind.?

Another Aurora woman was somewhat on the fence: ?I don't feel strongly one way or another, but I think it would be simpler if people would accept that words like ?sons' are understood to represent all citizens, rather than interpreting them as exclusionary. Similarly, ?God' these days could be interpreted as anything from the Christian God to the main leader of any religion, or even some general spirituality belief. Similarly, if someone asked me, as a female, to ?man' a table for an hour, I am not at all upset about that term as I am focused on the meaning, which is that they need help??

Other contributions were blunter, from ?CHANGE NOTHING? to ?disgust? that this is even a question on our national radar, and men identifying as feminists taking opposing viewpoints.

?I believe that women should have the same rights as men and be equal,? said one of the two gentlemen. ?However, the line represents our history as a nation and I feel if we change that, we are dishonouring history.?

On the other hand: ?I feel, especially as a young country, we need to reflect that white Christian men do not, or should not, be considered the only norm, said the gay, feminist, atheist white man.?

But what say you? Whether you want to maintain tradition, bring the national anthem into the 21st Century (because, as one work colleague put it when responding to the question, ?Because it is 2016!?), gay, straight, black, white, atheist, feminist or otherwise, I would like to hear your opinions. Send your views to brock@auroran.com.