

BROCK'S BANTER: Our Silver Thread

By Brock Weir

Early on in her reign, The Queen shared a rare insight into a conversation she had with one of her Prime Ministers. When Queen Elizabeth II came to the throne in 1952, Winston Churchill was once again Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, a politician who began his long tenure of public service during the reign of the monarch's great-great grandmother, Queen Victoria. Evidently this wise old man had a lot to share with the new 25-year-old monarch and, somehow, conversation turned to the condition of the River Thames.

Churchill, the Queen recalled, described the busy river as 'the silver thread that runs through British history.' It was a unique viewpoint and one The Queen admitted she hadn't considered before but it prompted her to look at things a little bit differently. Who could have predicted at that point in time that nearly 64 years later that young monarch herself would become a silver thread herself, not just one woven into the history of Great Britain, but into the history and public consciousness of Canada and the 14 other countries in which she is monarch.

Louis St. Laurent was Prime Minister of Canada when she succeeded her father, George VI, to become Queen of Canada on February 6, 1952. The Canada of that blustery winter day was a very different place than it is today. The country has developed and evolved considerably, and Elizabeth II has followed suit. She has been here to celebrate our achievements, our milestones, preside over the steering of our constitutional ship, to herald our heroes, honour our fallen, express her willingness to lend a hand when forces threatened to divide our nation, and encourage the inclusivity that has come to exemplify the Canada of today.

Queen Victoria's reign was said to have encompassed a whole epoch, with her name becoming synonymous with an entire era. Back in 1952, pundits of the day hailed the dawn of a 'new Elizabethan age?', a moniker that has scarcely been thrown about in the weeks and months leading up to Wednesday's milestone, but I wonder if history will ultimately prove this to be the case.

Victoria presided over an era hallmarked by incredible change and development - technological and social. So too has Elizabeth. 64 years ago, commercial air travel was still a novelty, one which many people still shied away from. Just over 15 years into her reign, The Queen was able to send a message which was left on the surface of the moon.

In 1952, letter-writing was still the best way to keep in touch with your friends and relatives, with telegrams and telegraphs still in the mix and very well used. In the 1970s, the Queen sent her first email and has embraced the technology ever since.

There will come a time when the 'modern architecture' of today, often typified by glass and steel constructions, will not be so modern anymore. Will history describe this as 'second-wave Elizabethan'? Will the uptight morality that has become synonymous with the word 'Victorian', a notion that has given way to an era where the pursuit of happiness is something to be celebrated and encouraged also come under the 'Elizabethan' banner? Only time will tell, but I think the Queen has this one in the bag.

As this week's milestone approaches, I have been reminded that the Queen has been a 'silver thread' in my own family's lore as well. My father was just a youngster when the then Princess Elizabeth and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, first visited Canada in 1951. Newly arrived from Regina, my grandparents sensed the history of the occasion and my dad vividly remembers waiting to catch a glimpse of the Royal Couple when they visited Sunnybrook Hospital.

On the other side of my family tree, my maternal grandparents had the same idea, taking time out of their maritime holiday in 1959 to take my mom to Moncton to see the now-Queen and Duke pass through on their coast-to-coast homecoming, the last old-school royal tour of its time before they became more thematic and purposeful.

They are memories that have vividly stayed with them over the course of the decades, and it is something my mom paid forward.

As an eleven year old with a budding interest in the royal family, I was very excited to learn the Queen and Prince Philip would be visiting Toronto in the summer of 1997 and as soon as the itinerary was released, we planned our course of action.

Eventually we decided waiting outside St. James' Cathedral to see the Royal Couple arrive and depart the traditional Sunday service would provide the best vantage point and armed with a bouquet of roses - just in case we happened to get close - left Newmarket at the crack of dawn to get a prime place at the crowd barrier.

It was June 29 and the weather was scorching. The heat made me very restless - and probably a bit ornery - but I kept my eye on the goal.

Suddenly, a cavalcade of police motorcycles arrived, signalling the fact the Queen's motorcade could not be far behind. I will never forget seeing this woman, such a familiar face but one I had only seen on TV and in books and newspapers, in the flesh.

Not having any idea about protocol, I strained holding out my bouquet as far as my arms would reach as the Queen passed by with the Bishop of Toronto. The Queen looked my way for a split second but continued on her way into the church.

I can only suppose the heat and the emotion of the occasion made me look distraught (and maybe I was) because just a moment or two after the Queen entered the church, a member of her security detail appeared on the steps, scoped out the crowd, and made a bee-line to where my mom and I were standing.

He said the Queen had asked him to come out to assure me there would be a walkabout following the church service and there would indeed be an opportunity to give her the bouquet. First, he added, the Queen would pass through a line of choirboys assembled on the steps and then she would turn around and come back to meet the crowd. I was elated and the rest of the service skipped by awfully fast.

Then, as the bells tolled, the Royal Party appeared on the top step.

As the Bishop gestured with his hand for the Queen to pass through the choir and loop around, I can still clearly see the look on The Queen's face. Her mouth formed a mild frown and she shook her head in a definitive 'no.'?

Gingerly stepping down the small hill in her heels, she came directly over to the crowd, eventually making her way to this excited youngster who was able to hand her the flowers before promptly zoning out completely from the excitement. Everything might have gone black almost as soon as the Queen was standing in front of me, but the memories of what happened before and after remain as fresh today as ever.

Long may she reign!