

BROCK'S BANTER: Red Sails

By Brock Weir

When you're fully immersed in it, occasionally you lose sight of the fact your own country's customs might seem a bit strange or quirky to outsiders.

Consider a text message I received from an American friend on Saturday night.

As it happened, both of us ? me in Aurora, he in New York City ? were watching Saturday Night Live at the same time.

This episode happened to be hosted by Canada's own Ryan Gosling.

In his opening monologue, Gosling was joined by fellow Canuck Mike Meyers for a musical tribute to an extensive menu of Canadiana.

They covered the ?about? vs. ?aboot? debate (the latter of which, for the record, I have never actually heard a Canadian say), Canada's sporting quirks, and Bonhomme Carnival even showed up to bust a move.

Then my phone buzzed.

It was a missive questioning just who ? or what ? the marshmallowy figure in the red tuque was.

I was flabbergasted.

After explaining the few talking points I had tucked away in the back of my mind about the Quebec Carnival, he seemed no less astounded.

?That's actually a thing?? he asked. ?Are the lacrosse stick beatings real??

At a loss as to how deep down the rabbit hole this conversation would actually go, I simply deployed one of my favourite Blanche quotes from *The Golden Girls*: ?Set the scene: have we been drinking??

That seemed to do the trick and the line of questioning turned to other, equally frivolous, matters.

But it made me think about what other Canadian customs or traditions might seem bizarre to Americans or overseas onlookers and my mind went back to the previous afternoon when the Governor General read the traditional Speech from the Throne.

As is tradition in the internet age, there were the regular snide remarks ? but this time a particularly timely and seasonal spate of sarcasm ? on the Santa-esque ensembles sported by the learned men and women who serve on the Supreme Court of Canada, references to American Late-Night News/Comedy shows' recent fascination with the maces (and sizes thereof) used in the Commons and Senate, and the unusually heated debates on just how suave Justin Trudeau is in general, or in comparison.

But what would they make about the goings-on in the red chamber itself?

When compared to some of the scandals that have unfolded in the hallowed halls of the United States Capitol, the recent brouhaha regarding Senate expenses might seem like chump change. Nevertheless, for us, it was rightly a significant issue.

For those reared in a nation where their senators are directly elected, would an appointed body seem like the foreign concept it actually is? Would they see a value in senate reform or abolition?

On our side of the border, where the conversation really matters, there has been no shortage of dialogue.

Over the course of the last Federal election we saw the Conservative Party's confused lack of a definitive position on the issue.

Theoretically, they proposed a system where senators would be directly elected by citizens but this position was clouded by their contradictory positions of (a) killing off the Senate through the tried and true method of Death By 1,000 Cuts in making the body look as inept as possible and (b) letting it wither on the vine by allowing vacancies to mount up and putting the onus on the Provinces to deal with it.

The NDP proposed outright abolition and made vague claims that the process in doing so would be much easier than anyone with the most basic knowledge of our constitutional reality could clearly say.

The Liberals, on the other hand, have proposed Senate reform, and now we have a bit more of an idea on how that reform might look.

THERE'S LIFE IN THE OLD GIRL YET

On a personal level, I can say I was always in favour of Senate reform as far back as the Jean Chretien days. When handfuls of Senators were appointed to the supposed ?Chamber of Sober Second Thought? essentially just a few sleeps before they reached the mandatory retirement age of 75, it was clear the appointment process was in desperate need to reform.

Having party lines drawn within the ?Chamber of Sober Second Thought? always seemed counterintuitive to this ideal as those appointed would always have a master to answer to. Let's face it, in recent months we have come to know that that higher-up can

occasionally be a determined absentee.

But what to replace it with? An appointment process whereby vacancies would be filled by a committee led by Companions of the Order of Canada was proposed, but quickly nixed because it ran the risk of politicising what is ostensibly an apolitical body representing the best of Canada's best. An advisory panel of Vice Regal Representatives and Territorial representatives was also thrown out there, but was canned for the same reason.

This is where we currently stand:

?The trust Canadians have in public institutions ? including Parliament ? has, at times, been compromised,? read the Governor General in a speech prepared for him by the new government. ?By working with greater openness and transparency, Parliament can restore it. To restore public trust and bring an end to partisanship, the Government will follow through on its commitment to reform the Senate by creating a new, non-partisan, merit-based process to advise the Prime Minister on Senate appointments.?

It is an encouraging development, and one I am particularly interested in watching take shape. It is not going to be smooth sailing. There are, myself included, some who question the merits of going down this route if the advisory panel, or whatever this system is ultimately called, is merely providing advice to the Prime Minister.

True reform will make the recommendations of the panel binding in some way.

It will also be interesting to see if it will be up to this panel, or to the PMO, in determining just what merits or qualifications are determined to make the ideal Senate recommendation. As things stand now, you really only have to meet age and property parameters and, as we have learned the hard way, owning a plot of land in Prince Edward Island does not a Senator make.

I am, however, convinced there is life in the old girl yet.

There will always be value, particularly in a majority, for the decisions and policies of the government to be vetted, reviewed, and evaluated by qualified, educated people with relevant life experiences to provide input on ? and help shape ? legislation in a way that is not dictated or damaged by any sense of party loyalty, but achieving that end is easier said than done.

In making good on this election plank, the Prime Minister has made the first steps, in my view, of righting the course of the Red Chamber, but it won't be entirely smooth sailing ahead.