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The death of 'Dominion Day'

The British North America Act of 1867 declares: 'The provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick shall form and be One Dominion under the Name of Canada.' Years later, a handful of parliamentarians objected that the word was 'too British.' And, in a debate that lasted all of five minutes, a new holiday was born.

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A wise nation preserves its records, gathers up its muniments, decorates the tombs of its illustrious dead, repairs great public structures, and fosters national pride and love of country, by perpetual reference to the sacrifices and glories of the past.

-- Joseph Howe, Father of Confederation.

In hindsight, it was a case of identity theft, an act of historical vandalism. A quarter-century ago, 13 members of Parliament hastily -- some say indecently -- renamed the country's national birthday in a swift bit of legislative sleight-of-hand.

At 4 o'clock on Friday, July 9, 1982, the House of Commons was almost empty. The 13 parliamentarians taking up space in the 282-seat chamber were, by most accounts, half asleep as they began Private Members' Hour. But then one of the more wakeful Liberals noticed the Tory MPs were slow to arrive in the chamber. Someone -- exactly who has never been firmly identified -- remembered Bill C-201, a private member's bill from Hal Herbert, the Liberal MP from Vaudreuil, that had been gathering dust ever since it had received first reading in May of 1980. "An Act to Amend the Holidays Act" proposed to change the name of the July 1 national holiday from "Dominion Day" to "Canada Day."

This wasn't the first time the change had been attempted. Between 1946 and 1982, there were some 30 attempts to push such revisionist legislation through the House of Commons. But there was always enough opposition to hold the postmodern crowd at bay. On this July afternoon, however, MPs seized the opportunity to rewrite history with all the haste of a shoplifter. Deputy Speaker Lloyd Francis called up the languishing legislation and, faster than you can say patronage appointment, sped it through to third reading without much more than a querulous murmur from the attendant parliamentarians. Tory Senator Walter Baker barely managed a befuddled query of "What is going on?" before Francis inquired whether the bill had unanimous consent. Somehow, according to Hansard, it did, despite Baker's apparent opposition. He later referred to Canada Day as "sterile, neutral, dull and somewhat plastic."

The whole process took five minutes. The MPs celebrated by declaring an early end to session at 4:05 p.m. "It is only appropriate that, in celebrating our new holiday called Canada Day, we should at least take a holiday of 55 minutes this afternoon," said New Democrat Mark Rose.

Such insouciance toward a long-held tradition was typical. The bill should never have been brought to a vote. At least 20 MPs were required to be in the House to conduct

business. With only 13 members in the House that afternoon, there was no quorum to pass legislation.

- ot that Speaker Jeanne Sauve was troubled. When the procedural irregularity was brought to her attention, she said that since no one called a quorum count, a quorum was deemed to exist, and, ergo, no procedural rules were violated.

And so today, Canadians mark their nation's birthday with a banal contrivance. Of course, to say this is to be labelled as out-of-date or dismissed as a colonial romantic.

As one young colleague put it: "It's Canada Day now. Get used to it. It only means something to people your age."

She was right. Canadians by and large have taken to Canada Day. Hundreds of thousands will show up today on Parliament Hill to mark the country's 139th birthday. They will wave the Maple Leaf flag, applaud the fireworks and lustily, if uncertainly, sing the national anthem with as much genuine enthusiasm as those who once waved the Red Ensign on Dominion Day not so long ago. It is probably no more possible to reclaim this piece of symbolic history than it is to restore the word "royal" on mailboxes. So why revisit a lost cause?

For this reason: For millions of still-living Canadians the loss of the word "Dominion" was, as Quebec senator Hartland Molson said during the Senate debate on Bill C-201, "another very small step in the process, which has continued over the last few years, of downgrading tradition and obscuring our heritage."

He was right. "Dominion" was a symbol that once helped provide English-speaking Canadians with a sense of identity. Symbols are metaphors of meaning, compact artifacts that encapsulate our attachments to things beyond ourselves. Symbols -- flags, monuments, and, yes, public holidays -- resonate with a transcendent significance. To be stripped of a symbol system is to be told, in effect, that the traditions and customs that give substance to your life are without value.

Admittedly, replacing "Dominion" with "Canada" might seem a minor matter, nothing worth serious concern. And that might have been true, if it had been an isolated case. But the holiday name change was only one item in a long project of cultural engineering on the part of Canada's progressivist elites to replace those symbols that provided English-speaking Canada with its always-tenuous sense of collective identity.

Thus, to remember the disappearance of Dominion Day is not nostalgia or even colonial romanticism. To lament the death of a parent or a grandparent is not only a matter of grief; it is also a way to honour those who came before you and gave your life meaning. To borrow a Biblical line: "I cannot but remember such things were / That were most precious to me."

What, exactly, was so precious about "Dominion?"

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A New Brunswicker, Sir Leonard Tilley, came up with the word as a way to encapsulate the aspirations of the Confederation generation.

Tilley was one of the delegates from the provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick who attended a conference in London in December of 1866 to discuss Confederation. The Fathers of Confederation initially thought to give the new nation the official name of Kingdom of Canada. But some fretted that our republican neighbours might not think kindly about having a kingdom on their northern border. One morning, Tilley was perusing the Bible and came across the eighth verse of the 72nd Psalm: "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea and from the river unto the ends of the earth." The concept appealed to his hopes that the country he and

the others were creating might stretch across the northern half of the North American continent from sea to sea to sea.

The other delegates agreed with Tilley. The Canadians convinced the colonial secretary, Lord Carnarvon, who, in turn, persuaded Queen Victoria of the virtues of "Dominion." And so the British North America Act of 1867 sets out how "the provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick shall form and be One Dominion under the Name of Canada."

Years later, Canada's self-anointed elites objected that the word was too British and betrayed a colonial mentality. As usual, they were rewriting history in pursuit of ideological ends. There is nothing "British" about the word, especially when you consider that its etymological roots can be traced to ancient Hebrew words that mean "to let rule." Nor does "dominion" reflect a subtle anglophone attitude toward Quebec, as more conspiracy-minded francophones claimed.

From Confederation through to the end of the Second World War, English-speaking Canadians, regardless of their ethnic background, marked July 1 as Dominion Day. It's doubtful any of the Ukrainian celebrants, much less the Irish or Scots, thought they were being "British." As law professor Robert Martin wrote, "the phrase 'Dominion status' was a constitutional term of art used to signify an independent, self-governing Commonwealth state."

For the longest time, "dominion" was embedded in the country's culture and institutions -- from the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (now boringly known as Statistics Canada) and the Dominion Land Survey to the Dominion Observatory. The federal government was called the "Dominion" government to distinguish it from provincial governments. When the prime minister and premiers met, they attended dominion-provincial conferences.

The word was equally common in the private sphere. Dozens of companies and organizations included it in their titles -- from the Dominion Football Association and the Dominion Exhibition of 1910 to Dominion Bridge and the Dominion Construction Company. Even today, there's still the occasional usage -- the Toronto-Dominion Bank, the Dominion of Canada Rifle Association and the Dominion Hotel in Victoria, for example.

But in the late 1940s, the "national" government started to eliminate "dominion" from institutional titles and official documents. Behind this retreat was a concern to ease tensions that had grown between Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis and prime minister Mackenzie King during the war years, largely because of the conscription crisis and Quebec's opposition to the war. When Louis St. Laurent became prime minister in 1948, "the tensions were eased by quietly dropping references to the dominion, viewed by Duplessis as an oppressive word implying Quebec's subservience to the government in Ottawa," writes geographer Alan Rayburn in a 1990 Canadian Geographic essay.

But it didn't stop there, of course. By the early 1970s, "almost all references in the media and by the federal government ... were to Canada Day," Rayburn notes. True, "the word dominion continues to be part of the official title of this country," he says, because the British North American Act was incorporated into the Canadian Constitution in 1982 as the Constitution Act, 1867. But for all intents and purposes, "dominion" is as dead as a dodo.

The effort was largely for naught. The suppression of "dominion," like other supposedly troublesome symbols, was done in the name of national unity, out of a perceived need to avoid alienating francophones. Pierre Trudeau admitted as much when he wrote: "If French Canadians abandon their concept of a national state, English Canada must do the same." In other words, English-speaking Canada was supposed to strip itself of its self-defining symbols to undermine Quebec's separatist sentiment.

Like many of Trudeau's ideas, the theory failed in practice. Senator Molson was quite right during the name-change debate in noting that the federal government always wants to promote national unity, but continually adopts "measures which divide us." To be sure, thanks to endless promotion and spendthrift use of taxpayers' money, "Canada Day" has laid a claim on the Canadian consciousness, at least outside Quebec. But most francophone Quebecers still prefer to celebrate St-Jean-Baptiste Day as their national holiday. More pointedly, the dropping of "dominion," like the imposition of the Charter, has done little to persuade most francophone Quebecers to abandon their longing for a French nation-state in North America.

On reflection, this should surprise no one. A nation's self-understanding depends on the sense of identity shared by citizens. As scholar Benedict Anderson points out, the citizen of even the smallest state never knows or meets more than a few fellow citizens. Yet his consciousness contains images -- flags, monuments, ceremonies, etc. -- that express his communion with those unknown others. In this sense, says Anderson, a nation is an "imagined community," an invented response to circumstances of history, geography, culture and demography. Out of this shared experience comes a collective self-perception that forms a citizen's "nation-ness."

This nation-ness is reflected in the national holidays of many countries. No American alive has any direct experience of 1776 rebellion against the British monarchy. But he refers to July 4 as Independence Day, not America Day, because that one word, Independence, encapsulates what it means to be a citizen of the United States. For a Frenchman, too, Bastille Day -- not France Day -- recalls the overthrow of the ancien regime during the French Revolution. In each case, specific words symbolically provide the essential self-understanding of the nation as whole, and what it means to be a citizen of that nation.

Dominion Day once carried a similar symbolic significance for millions of English-speaking Canadians. And to read the Hansard debate over Bill C-201 is to encounter not only the weakening of this sense of identity, but an inchoate confusion and sadness at its loss.

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On July 22, two weeks after C-201 zipped through the Commons, Liberal senator Florence Bird moved second reading of the bill in the Senate. She defended the legislation, describing Dominion Day as a holdover from British domination, and claimed that it was chosen "at the insistence of the British Foreign Office." She suggested that those who preferred Dominion Day suffered from an "inferiority complex" about their Canadian identity.

Dominion Day defenders were not going to accept such calumnies. Alberta senator Ernest Manning found it hard to believe the House of Commons had dealt with an important symbol of the nation in such a perfunctory manner. "It is the type of thing that creates serious divisions and alienation among Canadians," he said, noting that there was no public demand for the name change.

He corrected Senator Bird's history lesson, pointing out that "dominion" was "not forced on this country or even suggested to it by Great Britain," but originated with the Fathers of Confederation. He warned that to proceed with the name change without overwhelming public support will be perceived by many Canadians "as one more step by this government in a long series of deliberate steps to chip away at all those things which pertain to the rich heritage of this country's past."

Similar warnings were made by others during several days of debate in late July and early August, but Hansard makes abundantly clear that while the Trudeau government wanted to avoid responsibility for the bill, insisting that it was a private member's bill, it was adamant that the bill be approved regardless of any concerns. To their credit, senators, Tory and Liberal, balked at being party to a political hustle.

Liberal senator George McIlraith, while not disagreeing with the Canada Day idea,

described the name-change legislation as a "horrible little bill," and urged the government to proceed in a more "dignified way."

Tory senator Heath Macquarrie questioned the procedural irregularities and paucity of debate in the House of Commons. Future generations, he said, would view the "famous five minutes" with contempt.

The senator reminded his colleagues that the word "dominion" was used in the British North American Act because "the people from Canada wanted that word, the people from the new Dominion wanted that word." There was no intention in the word's adoption to assert anglophone domination of Quebec, he said, noting that George-Etienne Cartier, Quebec's leading Father of Confederation, endorsed the use of "dominion."

Francophone senators didn't accept that view, of course. "I don't want Canada to be dominated, which, to me, is what the word 'dominion' means," said Liberal senator Louis Robichaud, suggesting that those who cling to the word "dominion" betray a subservient attitude.

Senator Martial Asselin, a Tory, played the francophone-sensitivity card. "Because of the deep-rooted differences which still exist between anglophones and francophones, we should avail ourselves of every opportunity to demonstrate to French-speaking Canadians that there is room for them in this country."

And so it went, back and forth. Supporters of the bill insisted the word "dominion" carried neo-colonial connotations. Opponents insisted "'dominion' was chosen on a triumphal note to signal the escape from colonial status," as Senator Molson put it.

In the end, the rhetoric hardly mattered. The Trudeau government, as senator Royce Frith, the deputy leader of the government, acknowledged, wanted the name change even though it didn't want to assume responsibility for turning the bill into government legislation. Indeed, Senator Frith admitted the government was taking advantage of a "lucky bounce" in the House of Commons to achieve something it had wanted for three decades.

At least one Liberal, senator George McIlraith, found such cynicism disturbing, and a violation of Liberal principles. "I have argued as a Liberal throughout my life, but the very basis of that liberalism was the constant answerability of a government to the elected representatives of the people for their actions."

Perhaps, though, Liberal senator Yvette Rousseau came closest to articulating the fundamental issue at stake during the final day of debate. The senators, she said, have to "make a choice between a mostly historical and rather traditional vision of Canada and a vision of the future which reflects a different perception of the reality of our country."

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Every generation seeks in one way or another to define what it means to be Canadian. French-speaking Canadians, of course, have always known what they were about: the preservation of French culture in North America. English-speaking Canadians have always been less certain. Historically, they have invented various self-definitions: We were "British" North Americans, loyal to the Crown and inherited Anglo-Celtic traditions; we thought of ourselves as a rugged northern people, consciously rejecting the lure of the materialist republic to the south; more recently, we conceived of ourselves as a mosaic state of diverse cultures whose ability to live together would inspire the world.

- owadays, few would declare without qualification "who we are" as a people. A decades-old constitutional crisis, major institutional reconfigurations such as the Charter of Rights and the free trade agreements, the near-victory of Quebec separatism in 1995, as well as globalization, mass immigration, demographic

change, and, most recently, the increasing incoherence of multicultural values in the Age of Terror -- all this confirms that Canada is enduring an age of transition. As a result, traditions, ways of thought, habits of mind, political practices that once made sense of our lives no longer attract the same acceptance.

That is certainly true of "English" Canada, understood in a sociological sense to refer to the non-Quebec, non-aboriginal parts of Canada. English Canada, composed of people with increasingly diverse linguistic, ethnic, racial and cultural backgrounds, seems dispossessed of any substantive purpose for itself as a "nation," at least in the same way that francophone Quebecers still largely regard themselves as a nation. True, Canada still possesses all the trappings of a nation-state: national institutions -- the constitution, Parliament, the Supreme Court, the military, etc. -- that possess legitimacy and authority; borders that are recognized by other states; a place in the world's councils. Yet, you would be hard pressed to discern a coherent and convincing metaphor -- a symbol statement, as it were -- the captures the collective purposes of English Canada. You might hear mumblings about multiculturalism, the Charter and universal health care, but even those are offered in a way that makes English Canada is little more than a lifestyle state, "the greatest hotel on earth," as writer Yann Martel put it. You arrive with your cultural baggage, receive government room service when you check in, and carry on in your suite according to your lifestyle preferences -- religious, linguistic, sexual, etc. -- without regard for the other guests.

Such concerns about the Canadian identity -- or lack thereof -- are not new. Canadians, as scholar David Taras once said, have a "passion for identity." A Frenchman, a Briton or an American need not ask about national identity; such matters were settled long ago. For English Canada, however, a strong sense of "nation-ness" is hard to assert with confidence.

The Senate debate over Dominion Day versus Canada Day certainly reflected this uncertainty. Reading the Hansard account you cannot help but detect behind the appeals to history and tradition a confused awareness of a much larger loss, namely English Canada's lack of a "national" sensibility on par with that of French Canada's. Even by 1982, English Canada was, to borrow political scientist Philip Resnick's phrase, "the nation that dares not speak its name."

At least one senator seemed to understand that the loss of "dominion" was the death knell of a particular cultural inheritance.

Liberal senator Ann Bell gave the last speech in the debate. The sadness in her acknowledgement that the "Dominion Day" reflected a "dying" tradition is almost palpable. She worried that Canada would be poorer without this tradition, at least spiritually. "We have a political concept, we have a geographical concept, but I am afraid we are losing the spiritual concept of Canada. I believe that 'Dominion' has a connotation of a firm foundation and an assurance of growth. It takes us above and beyond rather small partisan political concepts of the country."

The senator's sentiments had little effect. Partisan requirements prevailed. Shortly before 10 p.m. on Oct. 25, 1982, the Senate gave third-reading approval to Bill C-201. Two days later, the Canada Day appellation was proclaimed as the law of the land.

Maybe it makes no difference in the grand scheme of things. We may no longer think of ourselves as a dominion, but the land -- from sea to sea to sea -- will outlast the ignorance of the politicians and even a negligent generation of Canadians. So we can all celebrate our dominion's birthday regardless of its official name.

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