

# ‘GOD SAVE THE QUEEN/DIEU SAUVE LA REINE’: THE ROLE OF THE CANADIAN MONARCHY IN SHAPING CANADIAN IDENTITY AND CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

Canada has had a monarchy for more than 150 years and has a varied and longstanding relationship with it. With such a long history involved, the influence monarchy has had on Canada has been profound and evolving; indeed, the institution itself transformed from a vestige of the British monarchy to an independent and distinctly Canadian one. Understanding this journey, and what the monarchy is now, is arguably more important than it has ever been in Canada. It is key to appreciating Canada’s diverse identity and what monarchy means in the 21st Century.

In this article, it is argued that the monarchy has played a significant role in shaping Canada’s modern society and has had an influence on its identity, akin to a steward overseeing the political and social atmosphere. This involves exploring the somewhat intensifying debate surrounding the institution’s future in Canada. This article also discusses the current circumstances surrounding the monarchy, considering important factors such as the spike in republican sentiment and reconciliation efforts with indigenous peoples.

## INTRODUCTION

*“I want the Crown in Canada to represent everything that is best and most admired in the Canadian ideal. I will continue to do my best to make it so during my lifetime, and I hope you will all continue to give me your help in this task.”* (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, n.d).

Thus declared Queen Elizabeth II, who called Canada her ‘home’, sharing an affinity held by the Queen Mother (also a frequent visitor), and declaring one such visit as having ‘made us [King George VI and Queen Elizabeth]’. It is often made clear by members of the Royal Family that they feel unwavering affection and support for Canada, demonstrated by the numerous visits that have been made by the Royal Family in the 21st Century alone. Successive Canadian governments have celebrated the relationship between the reigning monarch and Canada as contributing to ‘a sense of unity and pride among Canadians’ (Canadian Heritage, 2017).

Canada has a long historical relationship with monarchies, having been under the French, British, and now Canadian monarchies for most of its modern history; this has undoubtedly shaped Canadian identity over this period. Monarchy remains affixed as an integral part of the Canadian constitution, with the Governor General being delegated day-to-day governance – an office that has itself transformed considerably alongside the monarchy. The question of how Canadian identity synergizes with the monarchy has become increasingly discussed in recent years. It is contentious, as the country is continuing to assess the history of deeply prejudicial treatment of First Nations<sup>1</sup> people and the growth of a republican debate (albeit somewhat

more subdued than in other countries, such as Australia). Consequently, the question arises: exactly how ‘Canadian’ is the monarchy? Can such an identity ever be separated wholly from the extant ‘British’ part of Canada’s identity, along with the other Commonwealth Realms who shared Queen Elizabeth II as their monarch?

Understanding these questions, and the relationship between the monarchy and Canadian identity and society, is critical in coming to understand what ‘Canada’ truly is and may represent. It is also important to understand the political role played by the Governor General, and other viceregals<sup>2</sup>, as the ‘impartial referee’ in Canadian politics. Understanding this is key to appreciating how the role and its incumbents have shaped Canadian society and identity, as the most prominent representatives of monarchy in Canada. This article will examine this relationship and evaluate how definitively monarchy has and continues to shape Canadian society and its identity from post-Confederation<sup>3</sup> to the present. This is an important discussion amid calls for a reassessment of Canadian history and growing apathy and discontent towards institutions associated with the Monarchy. Drawing on relevant literature, this article will examine the historical role that the monarchy has played in developing Canadian identity from a self-governing colony to one of an independent nation; the significant role it plays in overseeing Canadian governance; and its contemporary role in Canadian society and culture. Understanding the institution of monarchy in Canada is arguably intertwined with understanding Canadian society and identity, considering the longstanding historical relationship it has with the country. Moreover, with debates surrounding

<sup>1</sup> A term used to describe indigenous peoples of Canada, who are neither Inuit nor Métis; they are classified distinctly in their own right

<sup>2</sup> A term used to describe the ceremonial representatives of the monarch, which in this case refers to Lieutenant Governors (Provinces) and the federal Governor General

<sup>3</sup>The process by which various British colonies in North America combined to form what is now known as Canada

monarchism after Queen Elizabeth II and addressing the legacy of mistreatment of indigenous peoples, exploring this relationship is prudent and key to understanding what the future holds for Canada's monarchy.

### MAKING A TRULY 'CANADIAN' IDENTITY

This section will consider the historical development of a Canadian identity and the contributions that the monarchy (in the form of individuals and the institution itself) has made towards this progression.

Confederation brought about a decisive transformation in the role of the monarchy, marking the transition from a collection of North American colonies to a unique institution in its own right. This contributed to the overall evolution of what is now the Canadian identity. From the onset of confederation, there was a drive to enhance the new national cohesion amid the threat of encroachment by the United States in an era of Manifest Destiny<sup>4</sup>. Scholars further noted that the presence of the monarchy represented a framework in which people of all ethnicities and cultures were respected as subjects. This would enable the two dominant cultures of Anglo- and French Canadians to unite and flourish as a nation loyal to the Crown as an institution (Henry, 2001). This is a sentiment that has become part of the political framework of Canada; the Monarch is officially described as giving '[to Canadians] a sense of belonging to our country' (Heritage, 2017). Arguably, this accords with the strong empirical support among Canadians for a continuation of her longstanding multiculturalism policy (Berry, 2013), as opposed to the alternative biculturalism between English and French Canada that was historically practiced for more than a century.

The transformation from a British to Canadian monarchy cannot be pinpointed precisely to a singular event, but rather to various events in Canada's history that collectively shaped the new 'Canadian' nature of monarchy. Indeed, even from the early years of Confederation, it was expressed strongly by various of its fathers, such as John A. Macdonald, that the new country should be termed a 'Kingdom' (although this idea was ultimately dropped). Discussions like these signify the depth of incorporation that aspects of the monarchy had in forming the dominion<sup>5</sup>, and ultimately modern Canada as a whole. The establishment of a separate Privy Council for Canada<sup>6</sup> also contributed to early solidifying of a separate and distinct identity from the 'mother country' and to the evolution of political independence; notably, the Canadian Privy Council met separately from the British Privy Council to approve of then-Princess Elizabeth's marriage to Prince Philip. The move signified that Canada was independent of the UK and acted in its own right, at a time when extensive British involvement was perceived as inappropriate interference.

The threat of American hegemony under the era of Manifest Destiny not only presented a physical threat to the new Dominion but also a cultural threat to its nation-building effort. This was not under the maxim of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', but rather based on responsible government and the alternative maxim of 'peace, order, and good government'. Such a threat continues to be perceived to this day, in light of intensifying partisanship in the United States. The 1963 Royal Commission, which focused on culture and bilingualism, noted the prospect that Canadian culture itself might become

'engulfed and drowned by the American culture' (Conway, 2018). Scholars argued that American continentalism was posing the 'greatest threat to Canadian nationality' (Morton, 1987). The association with the monarchy helped Canada construct a contrasting identity, distinguishing itself clearly from that of an American identity (Lipset, 1990). Indeed, many supporters of the Canadian monarchy note this factor as beneficial, viewing the presence of a monarch as conducive to making Canada's identity distinct, stable, and welcoming to all cultures (Monarchist League of Canada, n.d.). This approach to forming a national identity contrasted considerably with that of the American national consciousness, which sought broad cultural conformity to promote a similar sense of unity and stability.

The effort in nation-building was bolstered by successive arrivals of various royal family members, which often sparked jubilation among the populace. Figures such as Queen Victoria's daughter, Princess Louise, were established as popular and well-beloved among Canadians and shaped themselves as personifications of the country's identity. The presence of Princess Louise and her husband, the Marquess of Lorne, was significant in shaping various well-established institutions, such as the Royal Society of Canada. Numerous places, notably Regina, Saskatchewan (named after Queen Victoria), were named in honour of the Royal Family. Such institutions, and the vast majority of these markers of royal influence, remain presently unchanged, albeit not without scrutiny. Royal tours have historically been significant in helping establish a distinct Canadian identity in the forming years after Confederation. Queen Elizabeth II alone visited Canada on 22 occasions, many of which were significant, such as the signing of the Canada Act 1982, and toured the country during her Ruby Jubilee and the country's 125th anniversary.

Various royals and Governor Generals would continue to contribute to early efforts. Figures such as Lord Buchan would help advance Canadian literature and the arts, even going as far at the time as to suggest Canadians' loyalty was not to the British Commonwealth, but rather to Canada and her King instead. This reflected the conflict between Imperial loyalists who abhorred any separation of ties with the idealized 'Mother Country'. Arguably, the most significant of these was the visit in 1939 by King George VI and the then-Queen Elizabeth. Despite the undertone being to help bolster support for the UK in the coming World War, the first visit of a reigning monarch was unprecedented, as the couple received warm welcomes while touring every province. Importantly, it was received not as the British monarch in the subsequent visit to the United States, but rather as the King of Canada, reflecting not on the 'Britishness' of the monarchy, as previously, but more on its 'Canadianness'. In particular, the 1939 royal visit amplified the efforts made by Buchan to promote an unambiguous Canadian identity, which in part was supported by the King and Queen Mother, both of whom expressed affectionately their pride in being 'Canadians', as opposed to merely 'British' representatives visiting a possession of the British empire. These visits, in conjunction with the growing autonomy granted to the Dominion, helped to mould a unique sense of identity for the country, instead of that of a British colonial territory in North America, as it increasingly asserted political independence from London. This would culminate notably with

<sup>4</sup> Manifest Destiny was a widely held cultural belief in the 19th-century United States that American settlers were destined to expand across North America, which included at the time the real possibility of expanding into British North American colonies

<sup>5</sup> A historical term (now considered archaic) to denote a self-governing colony of the Empire

<sup>6</sup> A group that provides political and constitutional advice for the monarch, from which they practically act on the advice given, consists of the Cabinet and other appointed individuals

Patriation<sup>7</sup> itself, with Queen Elizabeth II personally assenting to the final political separation between Canada and the UK in 1982.

Since then, while both the Canadian and British monarchies are under the same monarch and share close cultural ties, they are nonetheless separate and unique, moulded by various circumstances and the efforts of politicians and members of the royal family, shaping the multicultural identity with which Canada associates today.

### THE CROWN AS THE SUPREME POLITICAL AUTHORITY

This section will consider the political role that the Canadian Monarchy (the Crown) has in regulating governance and politics in Canada. While a mainly symbolic role, the Crown's political functions have an important history and are key to understanding what defines Canada's identity.

The Crown and the monarch's role as head-of-state has often been misunderstood among many Canadians themselves, with a 2008 Ipsos Reid poll finding that 75% of all voters were not able to identify Queen Elizabeth II as the Canadian head-of-state, assuming it incorrectly to be the Governor General or the Prime Minister (CBC et al, 2002). Yet, ultimately all political authority in the country is vested in the institution of the Crown, acting as the ultimate arbiter of the maxim 'peace, order, and good governance'. However, with unprecedented republican sentiment and scandals surrounding the office of the Governor General, the reliability of the Crown and its representatives has come into question.

The role of the monarch's provincial and federal representatives in Canadian politics and governance has, like the monarchy itself, evolved during Canada's history. They are arguably one of the more prominent symbolisms of the institution, slowly becoming the de-facto heads-of-state for their respective territories, and indeed described thus in official publications (Governor General, 2016). As such, a key facet of these offices is impartiality when handling political affairs. Despite wielding extensive reserved powers, they have seldom been used without the consent of the government (a key constitutional convention). The occasions on which they have not have almost always caused controversy, often triggering a constitutional crisis, something that occurred infamously in Australia in 1975<sup>8</sup>

In Canada, the King-Byng affair marked a significant transformation in the office of Governor General, becoming no longer an agent of the British government and contributing to the political independence of the dominions with the Balfour Declaration. The decision by Governor General Lord Byng to refuse Prime Minister King's advice was unprecedented, especially for one of the oldest dominions of the Empire. This not only helped the evolution of Canadian political independence, but also arguably diminished any chance of political 'interference' from the (newly defined) position of Governor General as a viceroy and representative of the Dominion (Šubrt, 2019). Nonetheless, the office remains one akin to a watchdog of the government, and this role would be further tested with the prorogation<sup>9</sup> dispute with Prime Minister

Harper, which, like the King-Byng affair, spawned various interpretations of Governor General Jean's decision to prorogue Parliament. These interpretations have varied from approval of the decision to maintain 'constitutional peace' to criticism as a 'rubber stamp' decision (Wheeldon, 2008). The presence of such interpretations only serves to show the extent of political tight-ropeing. While it may not occur often, it presents the dilemma posed to the Monarch and their representatives. While it is often controversial, whenever the Governor General utilizes their reserve powers (especially against the advice of elected officials), the nature of constitutional conventions presents a system in which vicereals, and the Monarch aim to stay out of the political foreground. This political arena is instead dominated by elected representatives in the country; it is often convention for elected officials to resolve political disputes and negotiations while the vicereals and the monarch are the referees (Brinker and Chen, 2017).

The relationship between the Monarch (and, by extension and more practically, the vicereals) and their Prime Ministers/Premiers is also defined by the mutual exchange of advice and understanding. While, as previously stated, the Monarch is intended to be impartial and the institution is not designed to enable political interference, there have been various occasions on which the opinions of the monarch have been revealed, and such opinions have come to the fore with recent constitutional changes. The path that would lead to Patriation was noted to have been of great interest to Queen Elizabeth II, who was personally credited by Prime Minister P.E Trudeau as a key contributor to the process. However, the lack of inclusion of Quebec's opinion in the Canada Act 1982<sup>10</sup> was said to have been a source of personal regret. The sentiment to amend this would be reflected later on in her support for the attempted inclusion of the province in the Meech Lake Accords<sup>11</sup>, which aimed to end the political rift between the sovereigntist-led provincial government and the federal framework.

This relationship between the vicereals and the monarch has been broadly cordial and praised as mutually beneficial by successive Prime Ministers. Despite this, friction in such a relationship has been observed and is often publicized and subject to speculation. Historically, during the era of British-appointed Governor Generals, there was notable disagreement between the Prime Minister and Governor General, who as an agent of the British government was ultimately answerable to London and not to the Dominion's government. Disagreements between the two individuals would often lead to the Colonial Office having to intervene and overrule the advice of the Canadian Prime Minister with its own interpretation. These disputes would vary from the aforementioned 'Kingdom' naming dispute, to upholding constitutional convention and the principles of responsible government devolved from imperial administration. This colonial system of deference is a legacy that has left the office of Governor General, and the Monarchy by extension, mired in confusion among the general public. Differing perceptions linger over whether Canada is still a colonial entity answerable to the United Kingdom, an island

<sup>7</sup> A constitutional process which saw Canada formally end any right for the British Parliament to legislate for Canada

<sup>8</sup> A constitutional crisis which occurred when the Australian Governor-General dismissed Prime Minister Gough Whitlam over deadlock in the Australian Parliament, an unprecedented and controversial use of the reserve powers

<sup>9</sup> The action of discontinuing a session of parliament or other legislative assembly without dissolving it

<sup>10</sup> The main legislation of Patriation, which also provided for the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, passed by both the Canadian and British Parliaments, and personally signed by Queen Elizabeth II during a special ceremony in Ottawa

<sup>11</sup> An attempt at amending the constitution to persuade the endorsement of Quebec to the 1982 arrangement, which ultimately failed in the face of widespread opposition

almost 6,000 kilometres away, or if it is a legally separate Canadian institution with its own unique history.

The Crown's role as a political authority has been subject to a variety of interpretations. It has been derided by critics as a de-facto rubber stamp, whereas supporters view it as entrenched protection that prevents the overstepping and excesses of an elected government. New Zealand Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer considered both sides to be wrong to an extent (Palmer and Palmer, 2004). The importance of offices like the Governor General arguably lies between interpretations, acting in only the most exceptional political circumstances. They have been left playing the somewhat undesirable position of refereeing politics, something incumbents have done since the creation of Canada as a modern state. Over time, the role of 'referee' has become a key tenet of the Governor General's role in Canadian identity, and a duty it continues to honour.

### THE MONARCHY IN POPULAR CULTURE AND CANADIAN SOCIETY

An important aspect of the monarchy is its public image and its cultural role, and it is impractical to assess the nature and impact of the monarchy on Canadian identity without considering this. This section will also look at the current debates surrounding republicanism and reconciliation efforts.

As previously mentioned, the monarchy is framed by the Canadian government as not only a symbol of the nation, but one of unity that cohesively welcomes and includes Canadians of all backgrounds. However, the popularity and support for the Monarchy has wavered and strengthened over its long history, with its complex role and presence in Canadian society and its diverse culture being a subject of debate and research. This is a topic that comes to the fore particularly during events involving the royal family, such as the recent Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. With the significance of the event, there was discussion about the monarchy's status among Canadian news organizations, assessing Queen Elizabeth's reign. Other discussions involved the future of the monarchy in light of the sensitive situation of reconciliation with the First Nations, and other recent highly publicized scandals involving members of the Royal Family. Monarchical imagery and symbolism are also present in everyday life for Canadians. These appear in the form of banknotes, 'Royal' institutions and organizations, and holidays like Victoria Day (unique in being the only holiday dedicated to Queen Victoria).

Another visible aspect of the Royal family's public duties and image has been its link with the military, with many working royals being patrons (as Colonel-in-Chief, an honorary title) of units across the Canadian Armed Forces, with some units named in honour of royals, such as the PPCLI<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, Queen Elizabeth II held patronages to various military units across the armed forces; a manifestation of her (arguably otherwise symbolic) role as their commander-in-chief.

With the importance of monarchy to Canada, the question of how much popularity exists for the institution has been extensively researched, and there has been regular opinion polling on this issue. Frequent surges in support for both the monarchist and republican sides make formulating a clear and representative opinion difficult. Recent polling has indicated a shift in opinion towards supporting the abolition of the monarchy, with 51% polled believing the institution should not continue in future generations, although a figure of 55% supported retention of a constitutional monarchy until the

conclusion of Elizabeth II's reign (Angus Reid Institute, 2022). Monarchism in Canada further suffers from widespread apathy, possibly as a consequence of the normally insignificant role of the monarch in the lives of everyday Canadians, and the main advocacy for monarchism. Yet, at the same time, polls suggest that a president-led system is not favoured either; this is possibly a reflection of Queen Elizabeth II's strong individual approval ratings. It is the same apathy that is arguably holding back a stronger desire for change, given that the constitutional process to alter the status of the Monarchy is strenuous and fraught with political friction (Grenier, 2021).

One part of Canada that has consistently polled against support for the monarchy is the francophone province of Quebec. Historically, the relationship between the Quebecois and the monarchy has shifted considerably from one of broad popular support to the opposite over the period of a generation. Indeed, Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier's (the first French Canadian Prime Minister) statement that Quebecers were 'monarchical by religion, [and] by habit' reflects a completely reversed opinion to that held by the majority of the province nowadays, where visits have received a considerably colder welcome (Blatchford, 2011). The signing of Patriation, which effectively sidestepped Quebec, has been a point of bitter contention among sovereigntists<sup>13</sup>, notably leading to the province officially refraining from Golden Jubilee celebrations. Perceptions of the monarchy have transformed from one of a democratic shield and an institution to which French Canadians had a duty to be loyal, to one of an interfering federal institution in the province.

An important relationship for the Canadian monarchy is with the indigenous peoples of Canada, one that has endured for centuries and involved important treaties and principles that, in recent times, have come under greater scrutiny. The relationship between Canada's indigenous peoples and the monarchy has been historically personal, with chiefs often petitioning the monarch on grievances and requests directly; this reflects the view that the monarch is considered responsible for delivering the guarantees offered to members of the First Nations. These longstanding relationships have been expressed through discussions, gift exchanges, and ceremonies. However, the recent discovery of mass graves of indigenous children across former residential schools sparked anger among communities towards the complicity of the state that oversaw these processes. Some of this outrage has been aimed at the Monarchy, an institution that oversaw the governance resulting in the loss of indigenous culture, forced assimilation, and decades of mistreatment, leading to the toppling of statues and a flurry of protests (BBC News, 2021). Subsequent demands for a royal apology have demonstrated the nature of the relationship between the Crown and Indigenous peoples.

Despite being valued and forming an important part of the country's identity, its presence in Canada remains sensitive. The relationship between the institution and Canadians needs to be handled carefully by successive royals, as the country engages further in the reconciliation process and debates the monarchy's future in Canada.

### CONCLUSION

The impact that the monarchy has had on founding modern-day Canada is significant and continues to have a consequential impact on contemporary Canadian society and culture. Its distinct symbolism helped in moulding an identity that stood out from the United States, while the contributions of

<sup>12</sup> Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry

<sup>13</sup> A movement that supports Quebec becoming 'sovereign' over all governance decisions that are applicable to the province

sympathetic royals assisted in its evolution from a subordinate entity of the 'British' Crown to a separate and unique 'Canadian' one. Various events such as the Royal Visit of 1939 and Patriation likewise aided in the evolution of Canadian independence, alongside political developments that helped create a long-lasting independent identity from its historically dependent colonial relationship with the United Kingdom.

The political role held by the Monarch and their viceregal representatives has been one of understated importance. It suffers from widespread confusion among Canadians over the role that they play as 'impartial referee'. While there has been no major usage of the reserve powers vested in the Monarch and Governor General in recent times, previous usage of such powers has not escaped controversy. Historical and key constitutional disputes like the King-Byng affair should be recognized as developing the path towards independence for Canada, but also affecting other dominions such as Australia. If anything, the lack of usage of such powers has been deemed ideal in contemporary times, when elected officials of the government are instead expected to lead.

The Monarchy's public role is to provide unity for the incredibly diverse Canadian nation, where all subjects of the Crown are treated as equals and equally welcome, and the visible facets of that role such as public tours and patronages

have aimed to serve that purpose. Nonetheless, the monarchy's position in Canadian society has been under constant scrutiny, with particular calls for a re-evaluation of the perceived 'colonial' relationship of the Monarchy with Canada, and the well-established political and public hostility towards the institution in Quebec (the country's second-most populated province). Despite opposition and apathy towards the Monarchy, recent polls have shown a lack of appetite to change the current system. While the relationship between the Crown and the indigenous peoples of Canada has historically been valued, it too has faced scrutiny and re-evaluation amid recent tragedies, and is in focus at a time when reconciliation with the darker parts of Canada's history is vital.

Whether for the strengths or controversies surrounding its nature, the entrenched institution of the monarchy has played a key role in shaping what is seen as 'Canadian identity'; a diverse and multicultural nation in which Canadians as subjects of the Crown are treated as equal and welcomed to flourish. This is a role it has aimed to fulfil but one that remains mired with controversies, opposition, and apathy.

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