



Column / Don Newman

Peace, Unity and the Canadian Way

Where did the time go?

As Canada marks its 150th birthday, it doesn't seem all that long ago that we were celebrating the centenary, in 1967.

Since the centennial flame, the school trips, the building projects and Bobby Gimby leading us singing Ca-na-da, one third of Canada's history has occurred. And many of us have lived all of it. More of us have lived much of it and everyone has lived some of it.

As at any significant anniversary, it is incumbent on us to pause, look back at what has been accomplished, and then look ahead to what remains to be done.

As we look back at the past 50 years, what are the milestones, and what are the things that we wouldn't want to keep doing over and over?

The most important thing fits both of those categories. We have learned that we can't take our country for granted. Twice in the past 50 years, our very existence has been threatened. Both times, in 1980 and again in 1995, we had to fight referendums on Quebec secession.

That is something that we don't want to keep doing over and over. And maybe we won't have to. Because certainly the best thing that illustrates what it means to be a Canadian happened after the separatists lost the 1995 referendum by the razor thin margin of one point, 50.56 to 49.44 per cent.

If you can't remember what hap-

pened after that referendum that is because nothing happened. Despite the closeness of the vote and the obvious disappointment of the losers there were no riots, no demonstrations, no public vandalism. Instead they accepted the results, licked their wounds and went home to plan another try some other time. Separatists in Quebec acted in a very Canadian way.

That happened because of wisdom shown 50 years ago, when separatists and separatism were in the ascendancy. In most countries people who wanted to break that country up would be arrested, imprisoned or deported.

But in this country, we Canadianized separatism, even agreeing to call it the sovereignty movement, much more respectable. The "soft question" in 1980 asked Quebecers if they wanted both sovereignty and economic "association" with Canada.

We decided that if Quebec separatists could achieve their goals politically—then the rest of the country would have to deal with them politically. The result is that separatists have been turned into politicians. Not in Canada would they be portrayed as romantic freedom fighters, hiding in the woods, sweeping down to stage hit and run attacks.

Instead, they became members of the decidedly unromantic political class, dealing with potholes in roads, wait-times for health care, education and taxes. By dealing with separation and separatists in a Canadian way, we

made it less likely to happen.

Now as we embark on the next 50 years, we have to use that combination of Canadian ingenuity and common sense to solve other pressing problems.

How to get our energy resources to world markets while combating rising world temperatures? Difficult, yes, but surely no more difficult than turning separatists into politicians. And longer term, and as important as accommodating Quebec within Canada in the last 50 years, is dealing with the plight of our first people, indigenous Canadians.

Arguably the plight of First Nations is even worse than it was 50 years ago. The Residential Schools have finally been shut down, but their ruinous effects linger on. As more young indigenous people have left reserves and relocated in cities, they have been completely unprepared.

Uneducated and unemployed, they have fallen victim to the worst ills of the cities: Alcoholism, drug addiction, prostitution, lack of health care and all other manner of social ills.

For Canada, this is the problem of our time. If we as Canadians cannot address this problem before we celebrate another significant anniversary, then Canada will have little to celebrate. **P**

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