

Disgraceful treatment of Julie Payette diminishes the governor general's office

It is an abysmal farce that makes a mockery of Canada's constitutional confusion and obsolescence.

by Conrad Black



Julie Payette

The fiasco of departed Governor General Julie Payette highlights what has gradually become the terminal absurdity of that office. It is a colonial title and the colonial governors general not only represented the French and British monarchs symbolically but asserted almost absolute authority under the French and ultimate authority under the British until Lord Elgin was sent by the young Queen Victoria to establish responsible government and autonomy in domestic matters for the then so-called United Province of Canada in 1848.

This was the triumph of Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte

LaFontaine and Canada's purposeful participation in the revolutionary movements that swept much of Europe that year, evicting the House of Orleans in France and bringing in Napoleon's nephew, and ejecting the 39-year chief minister of the Habsburg Empire in Vienna, Metternich. Many of the early Canadian governors were very capable, especially Samuel de Champlain, the founder of New France, and Louis de Frontenac its principal defender against the hostile natives and Americans, and Sir Guy Carleton (Lord Dorchester), chief author of the Québec Act and de facto founder of Ontario; they were among the greatest statesmen in Canada's history.

The governor general continued to be an important official, and the British sent a sequence of distinguished men: Dufferin, Lansdowne, Stanley, and Aberdeen, were all senior British cabinet officials and the first two were Viceroys of India. The Marquess of Lorne was Queen Victoria's son-in-law, the Duke of Connaught was King George V's brother and two of the last British nominees to the post were among the most distinguished: the novelist John Buchan, Lord Tweedsmuir, and the allied commander in World War II in North Africa and Italy, who departed Ottawa to become Minister of Defence in Mr. Churchill's second government, Field Marshal, Viscount Alexander.

The initial Canadian appointees generally maintained this standard: Vincent Massey was a well-regarded minister to Washington and high commissioner in London and trustee of the National and Tate Galleries; Georges Vanier was a distinguished and gallant general and a highly respected ambassador to France. Roland Michener was a much-admired speaker of the House of Commons, Jules Leger was a very capable senior diplomat. Since then the only occupant of the appropriate stature to be the de facto chief of state of the G-7 country Canada has become was the gracious and elegant former speaker of the House and cabinet minister Jeanne Sauve.

Apart from that, the highest protocol position in the country

has been shunted between voting groups. The admirable but not particularly exceptional former premier of Manitoba Ed Schreyer was the first whose ancestry was neither British nor French. Ray Hnatyshyn was the first Ukrainian, Romeo LeBlanc the first Acadian, Adrienne Clarkson the first Chinese-Canadian, Michael Jean the first Haitian-Canadian, but none of them had especially remarkable careers. David Johnston was an earnest bureaucratic careerist specializing in university administration, a good background for a senior public official.

I thought Julie Payette would be excellent, as contemporary and an ex-astronaut, and from my slight acquaintance with her, a charming woman. Obviously it has not worked out, but the manner of her departure further minimizes the credibility and relevance of the viceregal office. She was apparently pushed out because a number of members of the governor general's staff, with full anonymity, assured a management consulting group engaged by the Privy Council Office to interview them, that there was a "toxic" and oppressive atmosphere among those working closely with the governor general.

The chief of state of this country, other than when the monarch is physically present in Canada, an event which has not occurred for many years, has been pitched out of office because of anonymous complaints against rude and authoritarian management. No allegations have been made of physical abuse or underpayment of salaries or wages. It would be difficult to imagine anything more conducive to reducing the ostensibly highest office in the land to a state of utter fatuity. Roughly analogous figures in some of the world's other 198 countries, (including Taiwan, Palestine, and the Holy See), have been dispensed with in coups d'état where there was at least a threat of force; but I am confident that no other chief or acting chief of state has been given the high-jump because of the denunciations of their manners by anonymous underlings. None of them was conscripted to do this work; why

didn't they quit if they didn't like their jobs? Mme. Payette bloodlessly replicates the fate of Madame du Barry, mistress of Louis XV, who was sent to the guillotine on the evidence of her Bengali servant Zamor in 1793. He happily followed the tumbril and cheered the execution.

It is an abysmal farce and it makes a mockery of the constitutional confusion and obsolescence that afflicts the Canadian state. The only ceremonious chiefs of state that function well are veritable sovereigns like Queen Elizabeth, the Emperor of Japan, and the monarchs of a number of northern and western European countries. The kings of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Thailand are the most powerful political figures in their countries. Ceremonious presidents as in Germany and Italy tend to be veteran politicians standing in, in those countries for the deposed Hohenzollern and Savoy dynasties. I don't believe that the hereditary principle will durably work for a non-residential monarchy. Even if the present queen's successors are as devoted and estimable as she is, the present system is ultimately impractical.

However, it is valuable and should not be jettisoned, because the senior members of the Commonwealth, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore are capable of forming an important and reasonably cohesive group of allied countries which between them would have in normal economic times a GDP of \$6.5 trillion, the fourth bloc in the world after the United States, the European Union, and China. The senior secular institution in the world, the monarchy of Britain and the Commonwealth, should be adapted to its headship. Such an entity would be timely as both the European Union and the United States are in convulsions, the EU because of institutional strain ultimately resulting from the absence of democratic accountability for the European Union government, and the United States in a crisis of national self-confidence following its overwhelming and bloodless strategic victory in the Cold War, when it's Soviet rival

peacefully disintegrated.

Let us devise a new office combining the prerogatives of a republican president with executive authority as in the United States and France, with the governor general, and the monarch should remain as co-chief of state of Canada with that official. There should be a premier, as in France answering directly to parliament and managing day-to-day governmental affairs as the premier of France does. Canada could revert to calling itself a Dominion, a term coined and uniquely used in governmental terms by Canada (by the distinguished father of Confederation from New Brunswick Samuel L. Tilley), and it could be designated as combining seamlessly the best properties of a republic and a monarchy.

Canada is a unique country, the only transcontinental bicultural parliamentary Confederation in the history of the world, and it should design for itself unique institutions. And we should never again have the ostensible head of the country dumped by a gaggle of grumpy stenographers. Personally I wish Mme. Payette well.

Note: In response to Dr. Harry Rakowski here last week, I have never represented Donald Trump as "one of America's greatest presidents," but as a very successful president in policy terms, and the U.S. government has acknowledged that my co-defendants and I should never have been charged; the Doctor's pious little homily about hubris was piffle.

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