

Canada and the monarchy

Heir not so apparent?

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A royal visit as republicanism rises

AFP



WHEN Michaëlle Jean, the governor-general of Canada, was described as “head of state” on her website earlier this month, the government issued a quick and very public correction. “All Canadians know that Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state,” huffed Dimitri Soudas, the prime minister’s spokesman. However, in a poll last December only 24% of Canadians did know this. Almost double that number thought that the prime minister was head of state; and one-third thought it was the governor-general, who is in fact the queen’s representative in the country.

Whereas monarchists condemn such ignorance, republicans believe it is a natural consequence of keeping what they see as an archaic and increasingly meaningless link to Canada’s colonial past. Both sides think the ten-day visit of Prince Charles and Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall, beginning on November 2nd, will help their cause.

But only a little bit. Unlike in Australia, where a referendum on a republic failed in 1999, there has never been a national debate on the monarchy in Canada since the country was founded in 1867. Neither the monarchists nor the republicans, both fringe groups, have much hope that the royal visit will push this issue up the list of Canadian priorities, dominated by the weak economy and the H1N1 flu virus.

“It’s an opportunity for Canadians to get reacquainted with their future king,” says Robert Finch, head of the Monarchist League of Canada. Although the prince has made 14 visits, most recently in 2001, Mr Finch says there is still a “strangeness factor” to be overcome. He is sure Canadians will like what they see and identify with such princely causes as the environment, youth and bridging the gaps between religions.

Republicans are equally confident that when Canadians focus on the prince as their next head of state, they will wake up to the need to sever the connection. Polls have suggested a drift towards republicanism in recent years: a survey of 1,000 people in June by the Strategic Counsel, a pollster, found that 65% thought Canada should cut

its ties to the monarchy after the end of Elizabeth's reign, whereas only 35% wanted her successor to rule their country.

"Our supporters like to see the royals stay home, but we like them to show up because it's the only time Canadians really think about the monarchy," says Tom Freda, who leads Citizens for a Canadian Republic. His group shares tactics and lessons with counterparts in Australia, where a recent poll indicated that 51% favoured getting rid of the monarchy, and those in New Zealand, where the equivalent figure is 42%, and Britain, where it is only 18% (although differences in method mean the various polls are not strictly comparable).

It is not certain then that, when the time comes, the "Maple Crown" of Canada will pass to Prince Charles from his mother. But for the moment, Canadian apathy and the perceived difficulty of changing the constitution to appoint or elect a new head of state favour the monarchists' cause.

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