

When will Canada raise its flags again?

ANDREW POTTER

OPINION

Author of *On Decline: Stagnation, Nostalgia, and Why Every Year is the Worst One Ever*

Is the flag of Canada that flies over the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill, along with every other flag that adorns a federal institution in this country, ever going to be returned to full mast? If the current Prime Minister of Canada has anything to do with it, the answer appears to be no. And whatever the merits might have been of lowering the flags in the first place, the problems it was intended to address have gone unresolved while untold damage is being done to the country's binding symbolism.

The question of what holds together a place like Canada is a hard one to answer. Some countries are bound by the force of geography, or of language and ethnicity, or shared history, or sense of collective mission.

None of these apply to Canada today, if they ever did.

There's a lot of duct tape and baling wire holding Confederation together at the best of times – and these are far from the best of times.

A 2014 Leger Marketing survey asked respondents "What keeps Canada united?" The No. 1 answer was the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, named by a quarter of respondents, followed by the health care system at 22 per cent. Ranked much lower were many of the things that we're often told are central to the Canadian project, such as multiculturalism (9 per cent), official bilingualism (4 per cent) and equalization (4 per cent).

Around the same time, Statistics Canada decided to try to find out what programs or institutions were most recognized as important national symbols.

Once more, the Charter came out far ahead, followed by the flag, the national anthem, the RCMP and hockey.

Interestingly, for every national symbol that was named, immigrants were more likely than non-immigrants to believe that it was important to the national identity.

It is bad enough that Mr. Trudeau had allowed the flag of Canada to come to symbolize Canada's historic ill-treatment of its Indigenous peoples, but now the prospect of raising the flags is being held hostage by the Prime Minister's own callousness and indifference. This is no way to run a country.

The appearance of the Charter and the flag on these sorts of lists is not a coincidence. If the Charter is what underwrites what we all share as Canadians, regardless of our race or region, our language, ethnicity, gender or what have you, then the flag is what symbolizes our collective commitment to defending those rights and freedoms. To steal a line from the American philosopher Richard Rorty, the flag is what symbolizes the shared Canadian project of "achieving our country."

When Justin Trudeau ordered the flags lowered at the end of June, it was in response to a very specific national trauma – namely, reports of the unmarked graves of hundreds of Indigenous children who died while in the hands of the residential school system.

Given the scope of these awful revelations and their proximity to July 1, it was arguably the right move to lower the flags for a Canada Day that many people were no longer in much of a mood to celebrate.

But the flags never came back up. And the longer they stayed down, the less it became about the specific shock of the unmarked graves, and more about the more general continuing difficulties Canada has in treating its Indigenous peoples fairly.

Whenever he has been asked about the flags, Mr. Trudeau's irritated response has been to say that he needs the permission from Indigenous leaders to raise them.

But he has made no effort to set out for Canadians what the process would look like, to engage the leaders who would be part of the permission-giving body, and set benchmarks for what would count as sufficient progress to allow the flags to be raised.

A good opportunity to have started this conversation would have been Sept. 30, our first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. Indeed, if you're the prime minister of Canada and the flag over the Peace Tower has been half-masted for more than three months, you'd think getting this resolved would be near the top of your agenda. Instead, as is well known, Mr. Trudeau took the day off to go to the beach.

So now the problem is measurably worse. It is bad enough that Mr. Trudeau had allowed the flag of Canada to come to symbolize Canada's historic ill-treatment of its Indigenous peoples, but now the prospect of raising the flags is being held hostage by the Prime Minister's own callousness and indifference.

This is no way to run a country.

If Canada's collective project, if "achieving our country" as symbolized by the flag, is to be defined first and foremost by how to do right by Indigenous peoples, that's probably not a bad thing at all. But if so, it is a project that absolutely must not be left to the whims and fancies and political calculations of one man, especially one whose government's policies, and his own personal behaviour, have consistently failed so badly on this score.

It is up to Parliament to set this right. Thankfully, Canadians had the sense to return a minority government to Ottawa, which means our elected representatives have the ability to take control of this shambolic situation.

When the House of Commons finally meets this fall, this must be its first order of business.

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

WAKE-UP CALL

It's clear that Canada is not immune to populist-style politics, and our leaders should be aware of that going into the next election

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail and CTV News.

Two things are for certain: On election night, most Canadians were yelling at their TVs; and Canada learned it was not immune to populist-style politics.

Canada's parliamentary democracy has a geographic vulnerability to be gamed by political parties. In the past, winning was about building coalitions of voters in various parts of the country. Historically, the Liberals built coalitions around the Atlantic, and in cities in Quebec and Ontario; the Conservatives built coalitions in the West and rural areas.

Today, winning is about the efficient distribution of support across the country, rather than coalition-building.

In the past two elections, the Liberals, led by Justin Trudeau, lost the popular vote but won the greatest number of seats. (In 2021, the Liberals received only 33 per cent of the popular vote, yet won 47 per cent of seats.) It should be sobering to any prime minister to know that his opponents garnered more support.

Is it time for a rethink of our parliamentary democracy?

The challenge is that opposition parties clamour for democratic renewal until they win an election. Once victorious, they are hesitant to remake the system that put them in power.

The good news is that minority governments are probably the best environment for opposition parties to force a dialogue on democratic reform. Canada could look to other democracies, or chart its own course to building governments that are more representative of a greater number of Canadians. However, it is unclear which model is succeeding in this increasingly polarized, digitally influenced environment.

Ironically, back in 2015, with the election of Mr. Trudeau and his "sunny ways," observers outside of Canada wondered whether we were immune to some of the more disruptive politics taking place in other major democracies.

On the surface, it seemed plausible. The reality is that Mr. Trudeau had taken populist-style politics and adapted them to progressive issues, framing himself as an outsider, wanting the wealthy 1 per

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cent to pay their fair share of taxes to help the other 99 per cent – a classic populist strategy.

What Canada got was a very progressive government focused on virtue-signalling on a wide variety of issues and tilting to an even more progressive left to take the wind out of the New Democratic sails. The Liberal pitch was: Why waste a vote on the NDP when you can have an NDP-like government led by the Liberals? The message: Better the progressive devil you know, than the Conservatives.

More importantly, the People's Party of Canada – a non-factor in 2019 – became a noticeable and important force in the recent election. Led by former Conservative leadership contender Maxime Bernier, it effectively morphed into a protest party galvanizing a diversity of views – ranging from those who were upset with the major parties, resistance to big government, and those unhappy with what they viewed as a heavy-handed vaccination policy advanced by the Liberals.

In my 2018 book, *The Age of Voter Rage*, I pointed out that Canada was not immune to populist-style politics, and also noted that small swings in voters could have a dis-

proportionate impact on the nature of political discourse and on electoral outcomes. These were both evident in 2021.

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Protests also knocked the Liberal campaign off message. As Mr. Trudeau responded to the protesters, the other major party leaders were also forced to respond. Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole had to balance the realities of broadening voter appeal while responding to a protest movement led by a former Conservative caucus colleague and leadership aspirant. In that sense, the election was a win for the PPC because it disrupted the election and helped shape the focus of all the party leaders.

In the world of fantasy politics, Conservative strategists likely had blue-sky visions of adding PPC support to the Conservative tally and propelling Mr. O'Toole to government. One must remember that it took Stephen Harper more than one election to rebuild the Conservative movement into a winning coalition. Mr. O'Toole needs to find a path forward that reconciles the legacies of the two most successful Conservative leaders of this generation: Mr. Harper and Brian Mulroney. Mr. O'Toole has to tread a fine line to build his own winning coalition – one that keeps his party united and that is appealing to enough Canadians to win a governing majority.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh had a solid performance in the campaign and is well liked by Canadians. However, the New Democrats face an existential threat from a very progressive Liberal Party that undermines the relevance of the NDP. Little has changed since 2015. The NDP is politically mired after the more hopeful prospects under leaders Jack Layton and Tom Mulcair.

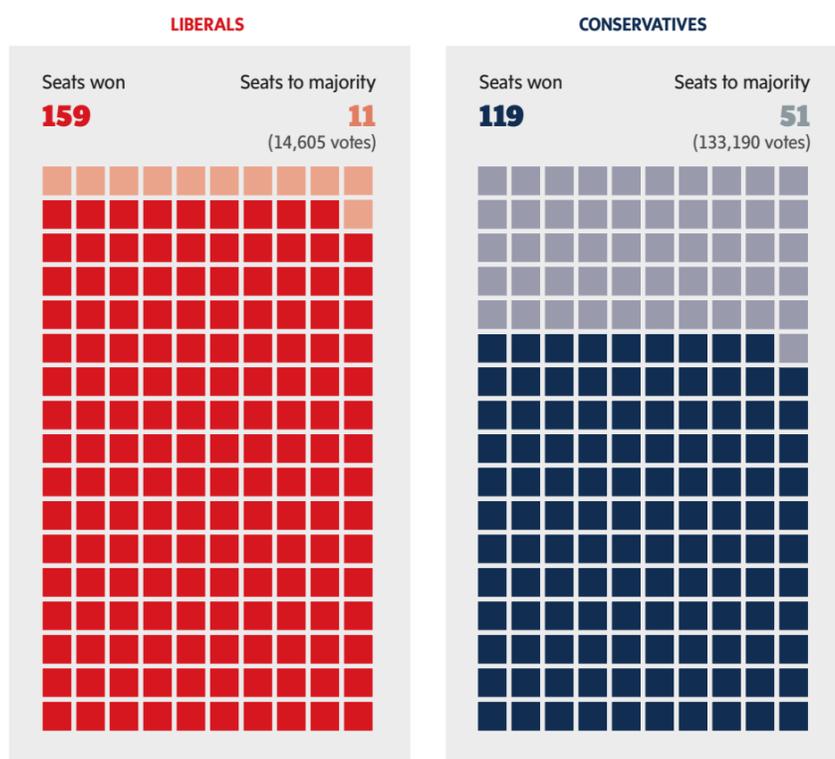
For Mr. Trudeau, another minority government outcome is not a green light for a business-as-usual agenda. It is a message from Canadians that if the Liberals want to form a majority, they need to moderate their approach. The fact that more than two in three Canadians voted against the government should give the Liberals pause.

The 2021 election should be a big wake-up call for politicians. The question now is: Will they get the message – or keep sleepwalking until the next election?

2021 federal election

LIBERALS VS. CONSERVATIVES

Ridings won vs. seats needed for majority



Percentage of popular vote won

