

BROCK'S BANTER: Evolving Milestones

By Brock Weir

There were just a few items on our respective checklists.

Toothbrush, toothpaste, soap and shampoo? Check, check, check, check.

Luggage locks? Check, check. (And, if you had at least one overtly cautious parent, check, check, check and check.)

A money belt? Check.

Underwear and socks? Well, this was one area where they got pretty specific. The powers-that-be recommended eight checks a piece.

It was time to sharpen the pencil.

They were all pretty standard items in the manifesto given to us as high schoolers in what was, for many of us, our first true overseas trip as a group.

Bound for Europe, they were all pretty practical suggestions.

But then there was the footnote, suggesting each of us head over to our local MP's office to get a few bundles of Canadian flags and lapel pins to hand out just in case we happened to strike up a conversation with someone wanting a memento from the Great White North.

At first blush, it seemed like an unusual suggestion but, just in case there was a method to the madness, I duly made my trip to the office of then-MP Karen Kraft Sloan, her staff loaded me up with gear, and I was one step closer to crossing the Atlantic.

It was later explained that these pieces of Canadiana were particularly welcomed by people overseas, symbols of our role on the international stage past and present, whether it happened to be our peacekeeping missions or the Liberation of the Netherlands, the latter of which was, at that particular point in time, a point in history with living memories in abundance.

Of course, there was also the factor that our proud red-and-white flag was not the stars-and-stripes and that, in many parts of Europe, was seen as something of a balm to the soul. Well, let's face facts ? it still is!

Before that, I hadn't considered how much could be charged in a flimsy piece of red and white pinbacked plastic, but the more I researched the prouder I was.

I suspect for many people in my generation, the earliest roots of patriotic pride were planted around 1992 when Canada was in the throes of Canada 125.

My elementary school was particularly enthusiastic about the milestone and it was, in retrospect, a pretty comprehensive crash course on what it means to be Canadian ? or, at least what it meant at that time.

There were song circles in which maritime folksongs were lovingly shared by enthusiastic teachers of dubious maritime roots, electives on the history of the Canadian flag, and notes on provincial and territorial emblems.

There were also mini ?units? on particular heroes and heroines of Canadian history, with Terry Fox and Laura Secord being particular hits with the crowd ? and no, free chocolate was not involved.

Another particular favourite was D-I-Y Indigenous crafts ranging from paintings in the style of what was seen as traditional Indigenous art, to dream catchers, to various explosions of feathers which were glued together in a way that is mortifying in hindsight.

In those days, as you might have guessed, the word ?Indigenous? did not figure into the lesson, nor did the idea that any of this would be considered a few years down the line to be cultural appropriation, but how far we have come in 25 years.

Those of us who grew up in English-speaking Canada around this time could probably still hum the Canada 125 commercial that played ad-nauseam throughout 1992.

Controversial at that time for the unlikely-in-retrospect reason that the young singer looked vaguely like a child of Brian and Mila Mulrone, it opened with the crash of coastal waves, golden fields of prairie wheat, Rocky Mountain vistas, Saskatchewan grain elevators, rushing rivers, forests, glaciers, cross-country trains, daisies, triumphant moments from the Canada-Russia series, miners, farmers, loggers, oil workers, an Indigenous woodworker, Terry Fox, cyclists, Scottish dancers, a token senior couple, Chateau Frontenac, a multicultural array of students, schooners, Mounties, Olympians, the Rideau Canal, and an accordion player.

It ticked all the boxes and was a snapshot of Canada at the time.

In many ways, it still is, and yet, in so many cases, it is decidedly not.

Much has changed in the last quarter century.

Aside from the fact that a bona fide child of Brian and Mila's is now a regular feature on our TV screens, the coastal waves still

crash, prairie wheat still waves and makes it to those iconic elevators, the Rocky Mountain vistas remain breathtaking. The forests are still there. We have remains of our glaciers. Trains still criss-cross the country, the Scots still dance, the Frontenac still welcomes guests, and although our oil workers have become rather beleaguered beast we still celebrate the legacy of Terry Fox and generations to come will have the image of Paul Henderson's goal seared into their minds.

As we prepare to mark Canada 150 this week, I am seeing a nation that has become less beholden to the ideas of Canada as a collection of landscapes.

I am seeing a nation that has also become less beholden as well to snapshots in time, whether it is celebrating our rich heritage of heroes and heroines of the past or defining the nation by what we have done as peacekeepers or in theatres of war.

Instead, Canada 150 seems to be defined as less of a celebration and more of a time to take stock of what Canada is and what we, as Canadians, would like our country to be.

This can be seen in ongoing ? and increased ? efforts to reach true reconciliation with our Indigenous peoples.

It can also be seen in the pride we, as a nation, have welcomed countless refugees from war-torn nations like Syria and gone the extra mile to help them build homes and new lives and becoming full and active members of our communities.

It can be seen as well, as recently as this past weekend where thousands of people from across Canada turned out in droves for their nearest Pride Parade, something that is ? perhaps because or in spite of recent controversies in Toronto ? becoming one of our most potent symbols of the human rights that have become synonymous with Canada.

Schools as well have become less focused on the chocolate box history of our country this time around and are focusing as well not just on Truth and Reconciliation, Inclusion and Human Rights, but also laying firm roots for the future, planting trees, gardens, and humanitarian efforts to leave legacies for those to come.

There is always room to celebrate our past, but in laying the foundations for our future, Canada 150 has the potential to become a solid exercise in the best of nation building.

The powerful symbolism of the Canadian flag will endure, the ritual of going abroad laden down with bags of lapel pins will do the same, but I would wager that 25 years from now, the student sitting in the terminal at Pearson, looking forward to their first great adventure, might have very different thoughts on that little pinback twirling absentmindedly in their fingers