

The Year in Ideas: Bashing Canada's 'dentally defective' icon

JOE 'O CONNOR (feat. JL GRANATSTEIN)

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For years we ignored him. Tucked him away in our change drawers. Lost him between our couch cushions. Paid him no heed.

But he never complained. Not as the years passed and the price of licorice reached 10, 15 and then 25 cents, popsicles hit 50 cents and Sally's allowance ballooned to five bucks a week, making the humble nickel — with the beaver, our buck-toothed national critter on the back — seem as quaint as a copper penny.

Forgotten, and no longer valued for his place in the galaxy of Canadian coins, the beaver — the only animal on the Department of Canadian Heritage's official list of Canadian national emblems — suffered further insult in late October when Senator Nancy Eaton dismissed him as a "dentally defective rat" and suggested that it was "high time that the beaver step aside as a Canadian emblem."

She continued, waxing senatorial about the "stately" polar bear "with its strength, courage, resourcefulness and dignity: "The polar bear is the world's largest terrestrial carnivore and Canada's most majestic and splendid mammal."

It was game on, polar bear v. beaver. It was a debate that was both farcical and profound, since it asked Canadians to ask themselves how they saw their country.

Were we industrious dam builders, fellers of trees and movers and shapers of waterways? Were we a rodent that drove the European fur trade and gave Canada, long before there was such a thing as Canada, its start?

The beaver had a work ethic, and a past. The polar bear had big teeth, scary claws and some high-powered allies in the corporate world. Coca-Cola has employed polar bears as its corporate symbol, at least in Christmas ad campaigns, since the 1920s.

Was Senator Eaton secretly shilling for Coke, or did something else compel her to drop her polar bear bomb, a sense, perhaps, that honest industrious just wasn't as big and sexy-sounding as: "the world's largest terrestrial carnivore?"

Other red flags appeared pointing to the Senator's motivations not being all that they seemed. Before deriding the beaver as a "19th-century-has-been," she praised him in a speech last June: "The history of Canada has been profoundly influenced by the habits of an animal that fittingly occupies a prominent place on her coat of arms."

Arm wrestling over national icons was not confined to the animal kingdom. Canada's navy and air force both reattached "Royal" to their names in 2011, a nod to the past and Canada's historic connection to Great Britain that drew praise in some circles and criticism in others.

"It is abject colonialism," Canadian military historian Jack Granatstein said. "I think history matters, but we don't have to be slavish in following it and restoring it."

Maybe we should be. Maybe that was the lesson in polar bear v. beaver. The past does matter. It helps us define what we are in the present by reminding us of where we have been.

Up until 1968, the Canadian navy was the Royal Canadian Navy and the air force was the Royal Canadian Air Force. Ditching the Royal, 43 years ago, might have been a demonstration of our individualism. Proof to the world we could stand on our two feet.

Well, we are standing now, and the last time I checked there was a mighty beaver, not a bear, on the nickel.