

Manley sticks the pin in the royal balloon

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Next time I run into John Manley I plan to curtsy to him. Curtsying is not something that comes easily to me, and I've never understood why it would be necessary to pay such uniquely obsequious homage to royalty.

But for Canada's deputy prime minister I will curtsy.

That's because I'm impressed by his gumption and honesty even as he is being pilloried by pundits, politicians and plebians across the land for his "terrible" and "embarrassing" behavior in questioning the relevance of royalty in Canada.

Let's get something straight here. Mr. Manley is entitled to his opinion. And a great problem for this country is that not enough politicians have the guts to give an honest opinion when asked for it. And, let's note here -- Mr. Manley, in stating he favoured a truly Canadian head of state -- was responding to reporters' questions.

For this supposed outrage, opposition politicians and monarchist leagues are demanding Jean Chretien remove Mr. Manley as escort to the royals during their sojourn in Ottawa which begins Saturday evening.

Mr. Manley's critics are forgetting that roughly half of Canadians feel more or less as he does. And they want him to make these sorts of statements.

Reader Robert Steeves: "[He] should be congratulated for having the courage to speak out while Canada's relationship with Britain's Royal Family is on everyone's mind."

Nor is this issue a tidy little secret. Polls for years have revealed the split in opinion among Canadians and Australians about the monarchy.

The Queen surely knows of such polls. She's a grown woman, presumably accustomed to hearing all manner of viewpoints. Her ears aren't made of porcelain. Why must we treat her like a china doll?

Should Ms. Windsor be spared association with Mr. Manley simply because he, as a member of our government, expressed a viewpoint that may differ from her own? Keep in mind, he said his piece in a democratic country that champions free speech.

As for the delicacy of the timing, Mr. Manley, as a public figure answerable to the people through their media, had no room to manoeuvre on when he made his remarks. He himself regrets the timing.

But his words represent no insult to Elizabeth. He is only suggesting, once her long and exemplary reign is complete, Canada consider another option that makes more sense for a mature, independent country.

The Queen herself might be fascinated by the idea. And if she were treated by others as a normal person instead of a bird in a gilded cage, a Canadian reporter might well put the question to her. Something like: "What do you think are the merits of having a British-based monarch presiding over Canada's government rather than a Canadian citizen?"

It's a darn good question. Since the lady currently is our head of state I'd certainly be interested in hearing her opinion.

Imagine having a head of state to whom you cannot even pose a question, a head of state you cannot even physically touch, in accordance with the rigours of existing protocol.

This is a circus scenario and Mr. Manley deserves applause for sticking a pin in the royal balloon, returning us however briefly to reality.

I'm sure Mr. Manley, whom I've always found to be a true gentleman, will do a fine job escorting the Queen and her consort around Ottawa.

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Apologies for an error in a column I wrote about the GST in which I stated there is no PST charged on services. In fact, provincial sales tax is applicable on many services.

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Another point of business: A group calling itself Defend Democracy Richmond, still fuming over MP Joe Peschisolido's crossing the floor last year from the Canadian Alliance bench to the Liberals, has given a petition bearing thousands of signatures to MPs Ted White, from the Alliance, and Svend Robinson, from the NDP, for imminent presentation to Parliament.

The petition asks for Mr. Peschisolido's resignation to make way for a byelection in Richmond.

Of course there's nothing compelling the Liberal government to act on the petition. And Mr. Chretien of late hasn't exactly been responsive to populist initiatives.

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