

Our anthem should include us all

The Montreal Gazette by Shari Graydon 30 June 2013

Reprinted in *The Vancouver Province* and the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*

It's like poking a hornet's nest: Dare to suggest that the words to the English version of our national anthem should be altered to include the 50 per cent of the population they currently leave out, and you're guaranteed to provoke an angry reaction of stinging attacks.

The puzzling part is: Why?

Unlike the hornets, whose lives may be imperilled by the poke, replacing the reference to "sons" in O Canada with a gender-neutral term threatens no one.

This week, Informed Opinions, the small social enterprise that I lead, addressed the topic in a modest campaign. And by modest I mean our team of two part-timers created an 80-second video using photos of awesome Canadian women accompanied by the music to O Canada. We respectfully argued that our anthem should reflect this country's worldwide reputation for equality and women's able service in a multitude of leadership capacities.

We uploaded the video onto our site and social-media platforms, and emailed it to our contacts list. Then, despite the fact that it features still shots of professors, politicians and soldiers (instead of moving footage of crazy cats or naked celebrities), we watched the viewings climb.

Encouragingly, alongside the cries of outrage, we also received enthusiastic emails, retweets and likes from hundreds of men and women who share our consternation over the resistance to restoring our national anthem to its original gender-neutrality. (Yes, original, and I'll get to that. Those who complain that a change would mess with our

cultural heritage need to know: It's already been messed with. Twice. And astonishingly, we survived!)

The naysayers responding to our initiative are dramatically fewer in number than the supporters, and they have yet to mount a coherent argument to bolster their case for the status quo. "You are taking the gender thing too far!" one exclaimed. "Is this really holding women back?" demanded another. "What's next, MAN-hole covers?!" slammed a third. Maybe it's just me, but I've never considered the iron discs covering sewer access points a national symbol. On the other hand, if the things were invented today, they probably wouldn't be called manhole covers. Because — and personally, I appreciate this — human beings, and the societies we inhabit, continue to evolve. Over the years that evolution has included an increasingly sophisticated, not to mention research-supported, understanding of the power language has to shape our perceptions and attitudes.

Consider what reliably occurs when your kid says, "There's a rabbit on the front lawn." You don't picture a raccoon. If you quote Robert Browning — "Man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" — to a roomful of people, and ask them what image popped into their head, it's not going to feature a woman. Trust me; I've tried this.

Human beings are literal creatures. We understand that words have precise meanings. That's why those on opposing sides of the abortion debate define themselves as "pro-choice" and "anti-abortion," not "pro-abortion" and "anti-choice." And it's why "alderman" and "stewardess" have helpfully been replaced with "councillor" and "flight attendant," in recognition that, in the 21st century, the people in these jobs are commonly of both sexes.

Even most 5-year-olds are not confused by the exclusivity of "sons." When the daughter of a friend came home a few years ago asking why O Canada referred to boys but not girls, my friend was not reassured by the school principal's response to her query about replacing the unfortunate lyrics. "We sing the official version," she was told, making it clear: sexism is official.

That needs to change.

The decision made in 1914 to replace “Thy dost in us command” with “In all thy sons command” to honour the men going to war on Canada’s behalf was well-intentioned, but it no longer makes sense. Canadian women have been serving in active combat roles for decades, and some of them return home in body bags as a result. They too deserve to be honoured by their national anthem.

I agree that the existing lyrics are problematic in other respects, ignoring both Canada’s significant aboriginal heritage and its immigrant-enriched citizenry. But these might also be easily fixed. We don’t suffer from a shortage of brilliant writers. Indeed, one of the emails I received this week was from Ron, a Toronto-based poet whose proposed revisions artfully address all of the above.

That’s why Informed Opinions, a non-profit project working to bridge the gender gap in public discourse, is challenging equality-minded Canadians to express their support for an anthem that better reflects our values.

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