

OPINION

A CLASSIC CANADIAN PASSION PLAY - THE WRATH OF GRAPES

CHERRY'S FIRING EXPOSES DIVIDE IN COUNTRY AND CITY, SAYS JOHN STEWART



JOHN STEWART
Column

HN Nov. 21, 2019

In 1989, Don Cherry said of Winnipeg Jets assistant coach Alpo Suhonen: "Alpo? Isn't that a dog food?"

The Jets' owner didn't chuckle. He called Cherry a racist for ridiculing the Scandinavian name.

In those days, it was a smirk, a shrug and a, "That's just Don being Don" before the longtime Mississauga resident resumed berating Europeans, French-speakers and anyone wimpy enough to wear a visor protecting them from cherry bombs launched by Coach's Cor-

ner.

"And you kids out there, don't bluster like I bluster 'cause I can do it and get away with it ... but if you did it ... some prickly principal would probably call it bullying. Isn't that right Ronnie?"

As even those people in faraway lands who are thinking about coming to Canada so they can intentionally not wear a poppy on Remembrance Day must know by now, Canada's favourite elderly curmudgeon finally got himself fired.

As Cherryisms go, his last offence was no worse than countless others, citing Quebec "whiners" or ex-NHL enforcer "pukes" who turned against fighting or bicycle-riding or

"left-wing pinkos" who didn't recognize Rob Ford as the budding "greatest mayor in Toronto's history."

There are many things to admire about Don Cherry, especially how a marginal pro, whose main attributes are fracturing English and inventing Fashion without Borders, became a household name.

He relentlessly and anonymously supports many charitable causes (Rose Cherry House, any animal or military group).

Like his great friend and fellow plain-speaking pillar of populism, Hazel McCallion, he never met a crowd he couldn't charm at the drop of a puck.

Too bad he couldn't stick to hockey. "Ifso Fatso," as his alter-ego Archie Bunker might say sit-

ting up there in his "ivory shower," Cherry had, "bigger fish to fly."

He was offside regularly when he cycled into the political zone.

His non-scientific poll of malls in Mississauga and Toronto proved that "those people" not wearing poppies came here to corrupt the land of milk and hockey, not revere it.

That cost him his job.

And might have launched a beneficial national debate about hurtful rhetoric, values, accountability, diversity and what it means to be Canadian.

Except we're all too busy taking sides and shouting.

This has turned into a national rock 'em, sock 'em brawl because Cherry epitomizes our best and worst: The folksy hard-scrabble everyman speak-

ing unvarnished truth to power and the voice of unacknowledged privilege lashing out blindly at incomprehensible change.

Ideally, his firing signals a changing of the guard for Canada and Mississauga.

Our contemporary mayor, Bonnie Crombie, called his words "despicable" saying, "we're proud of our diverse heritage and we'll always stand up for it."

Our former mayor, McCallion, supported Cherry, saying, "he is proud of his country and supports all Canadians."

Ahh ... except those who enjoy our way of life but don't wear poppies. "Those" he singled out for contempt.

Somehow, this hot stone league kerfuffle has galvanized our nation.

We're obsessing over an offhand hissy fit by an octogenarian crosspatch.

The old showman set himself on fire - and got us again.

John Stewart is a retired longtime journalist with the Mississauga News. His column, My Back Pages, appears each week.

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