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## Beaver be dammed

### A proposal to replace the beaver with the polar bear as our national emblem causes fur to fly

by Anne Kingston on Friday, November 4, 2011 10:10am - 50 Comments



Getty Images; Photo Illustration by Stephen Gregory

**THE  
RETHINK  
ISSUE**

Sen. Nicole Eaton had no idea when she stood up in the Red Chamber last week to propose the polar bear replace the beaver as Canada's national emblem that she was about to mine a national nerve.

And what a geyser she hit. Within hours of her statement, inflamed blog posts and "shocked and appalled" letters to the editor were flowing from the inhabitants of a nation built on lust for the once-fashionable, highly lucrative beaver pelts, one so great the

Hudson's Bay Company adorned its coat of arms with four of the rodents in 1678.

Since then, *Castor canadensis* has become enmeshed in the mercantile fabric of the country, as apparent in

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the swift reaction from Michael Budman and Don Green, co-founders of clothing company Roots, which has had a beaver on its logo since 1973, two years before the animal received official emblem status from the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau. They immediately launched a "Save the Beaver" petition online, collecting more than 6,000 signatures by early this week. The senator's remarks also triggered response from foes of the aquatic rodent, rallying a group of 100 Ottawa-area farmers who've seen trees destroyed and land flooded by a surging beaver population.

Sen. Eaton, who was appointed by the Conservative government in 2008, has seen her own flood—of emails, she tells *Maclean's* in an interview from her Ottawa office. "I thought a few thoughtful people would come up and say 'Oh Nicky, you should put in a private member's bill,'" she says with a laugh. "I did not expect the reaction." She likens the kerfuffle to the outrage generated by the new Canadian flag design introduced in 1964. "People were going to throw themselves in front of a car if the Union Jack was replaced. Look at it today." Most of the reaction has been negative, concedes Eaton, a member of the family that once owned Hudson's Bay Co. rival Eaton's: "They say that I'm a crackpot, or publicity seeking or 'How dare she!'"

Roots's Budman, for one, is bewildered that anyone would want to tamper with the beaver. "As Joe expressed so memorably in Molson's 'I Am Canadian' rant in 2000, 'The beaver is a truly proud and noble animal,'" he says, noting children love clothing with the animal on it. It's a huge seller in Asia, he says: "Asians love Canada, the idea of Canada, and the beaver because it's an industrious, hard-working animal." Budman is perplexed anyone would want to "negate" the beaver. "It seems incredible to us. Doesn't she have enough to do?" he asks of Sen. Eaton.

Historians, too, express surprise that anyone would want to muck with the symbol. "If you wanted an animal on your great seal, the beaver makes a lot of sense—a lot more sense than the polar bear," says Alan Axelrod, whose upcoming book *A Savage Empire: Trappers, Traders, Tribes, and the Wars that Made America* provides an examination of the rodent's pivotal role as a trade commodity that created the unique North American civilization historians call "the middle ground."

"It's not an animal that is casually associated with Canada," says Axelrod, an American based in Atlanta, Ga. "There are real historical connections—cultural connections, very positive connections. This animal was the reason for native Americans and Euro-Americans to have anything to do with one another. If anybody in the 16th, 17th or 18th century ran into a polar bear, they'd run the other way; they're not going to build an industry on it." But, as Axelrod writes, some associations were negative: beaver pelts may have "launched a civilization," but also summoned "the dark side of that civilization in the multifarious guises of greed, cruelty, ecological devastation and revolutionary warfare."

And it's precisely that colonial past Eaton wants to shed, she says, observing that because beaver pelts were exported to France and England without any value added, "They were the ones that made the money, not us. It's a typical 19th-century story."

The industrious, monogamous beaver, or "dentally defective rat," as Eaton prefers to call the mammal, is yesterday's rodent, she claims: "They're part of our colonial past, just as '*je me souviens*' is part of our colonial past," she says, referring to Quebec's motto, whose definition was actually recast in the late 1970s.



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Sen. Eaton admits “toothy tyrants” are part of her present, too: they’re a nuisance at her Georgian Bay cottage, where a beaver and his family take up residence under the main dock every summer. She says: “We clean it out every year and every year we clean it out again.”

Now she’d like a national image renovation for the 21st century, which she says belongs to the polygamous, isolated polar bear: “It’s the world’s largest terrestrial carnivore and Canada’s most majestic and splendid mammal, holding reign over the Arctic for thousands of years.” Her respect for the creature was stoked during her visit to the Arctic two years ago, she says. “I thought, what a mighty mammal—how adaptable they’ve been to the climate, to making the most of it. They dominate our northern landscape of cold and ice.”

Though the animal is represented in Canadian iconography on the side of the two-dollar coin, and in the Northwest Territories government flag and on licence plates, Eaton wants to see it gain greater prominence, in tandem with the Harper government’s emphasis on northern sovereignty: “The focus is going to be more and more on the North if the Northwest Passage opens,” she says.

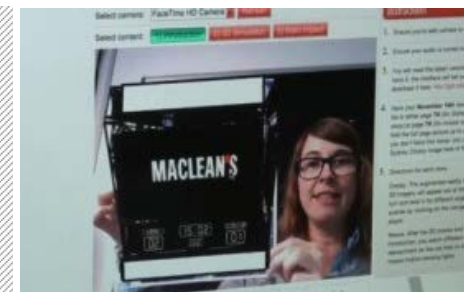
She’s less interested in the animal’s growing fashionability as a symbol of global warming, one that stems from the threat of possible extinction within the next century. Coca-Cola has used animated polar bears in its advertising since 1993; last month the furry white creatures were named “one of the greatest advertising mascots” of all time. The company just tag teamed with the World Wildlife Foundation to promote climate change and polar bear conservation awareness. It’s not alone: the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center of Biological Diversity announced its “eco-friendly” condom packaging featuring polar bears—along with five other endangered species.

Such concerns are “for the Al Gores of the world,” Eaton says, preferring to speak of Canada’s record of polar bear management using quotas and tags: “Some of those bear populations are growing and we’re managing very well,” she says, adding: “Perhaps it would bring attention to the bear if it became one of the animals on our shield or *the* animal on our shield.” She even gives a shout-out to Roots: “They should put a polar bear on one of their sweatshirts.”

The animal is a far more stately symbol than the beaver, Eaton says, one that sends a message that we will defend the *true North strong and free*: “If you think of the Prime Minister, there’s a strong image he makes of the polar bear being a strong navigator.”

Some scientists and public-policy analysts, however, view the beaver as the better navigational model. William Shotyk, a geochemist and professor at the University of Alberta, has endured pesky beaver encroachment on a project replanting thousands of trees in Ontario over the years. But it hasn’t diminished his respect for the herbivores, which he praises as intelligent, sensitive, resourceful and industrious. “The whole discussion isn’t about a hairy little animal versus a big bear in the Arctic,” Shotyk says. “It’s much more than that; it’s what the beaver represents. And it’s the only animal that completely modifies its environment for its own purposes. When beavers build a dam they’re accessing food supply so they don’t have to get out of the water. And they don’t hurt other animals.”

That makes them a perfect symbol for a progressive nation, he contends. “In many ways, they’re what I like to think Canadians are like.” He calls the animal, which faced extinction in the 19th century, “our best



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environmental good-news story. You give nature a chance and it will come back, provided you don't destroy it." In this regard, Grey Owl, the First Nation identity taken on by British author and wilderness authority Archibald Belaney, who wrote passionately about the beaver, is a must-read for every Canadian, he says.

Paul Kershaw, a public policy professor at the University of British Columbia, welcomes the beaver-polar bear debate. He sees carefully engineered beaver dams, which provide security from predators like bears, as models for human community-building, so much so he recently began using the directive "Think like a beaver" in his writing. "What happens when a leak springs [in a dam]?" he asks. "Individual beavers come and fix the leak because they know that as a community they all depend on it for their standard of living."

"And that is such a wonderful representation of what Canada has had such a long history of doing—at least until the 1970s," Kershaw says, noting the major "policy beavers" in the nation's history are parents of baby boomers who saw the advent of old age security, the Canada Pension Plan and the Canada Medical Care Act in the 1950s.

The nation has continued to focus on making sure markets expand through free trade and that our banks are secure, he says, but has done very little new building or adapting on the social policy side: "That means that those who have come of age after the 1970s are struggling because we haven't put in place new supports for the different reality."

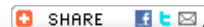
Kershaw likens the Canadian social safety net to a national beaver dam. "Rather than get rid of the beaver as our national symbol, we have to reclaim 'our beaver logic,' " he says. "We have to think like a beaver again; that's what's going to make it work for all generations, not just those who came of age in the 1970s, benefiting from all that had been built up before." For her part, Eaton says she's done with the beaver debate: "I'm going on to my next obsession, which is U.S. charities coming up here and involving themselves in Canadian policy."

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**Jason Cook**

Isn't the polar bear the national emblem of Greenland? A country we squabble with over little arctic islands?

1 week ago 4 Likes

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**gtrplyr055**

I'd heard it was Russia.

1 week ago in reply to Jason Cook 1 Like

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**d.**

The Bear is Russia's symbol, regardless of colour. They will sue us for design patent infringement.

1 week ago 5 Likes

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**d.**

OK. Greenland will sue us then.

1 week ago 2 Likes

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**WolfgangLW**

Polar Bears are definitely more aggressive than beavers, and perhaps that makes them a poor choice as a Canadian symbol. After all, we are perceived as easy-going by other nations is that really a bad thing?

1 week ago 12 Likes

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**Klem**

Yes, it is a bad thing.

1 week ago in reply to WolfgangLW 2 Likes

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**Thomas R**

Easy-going yes, but we're also characterized as people you don't wanna mess with, like the mighty beaver. I for instance, am pretty easy-going, but there's no way I'm gonna let it slide that you think Canada being relaxed yet industrious is bad for our image. Besides polar bears are goin extinct, I'm not sure that's what we're looking for in branding for Canada.

I am beaver.

1 week ago in reply to Klem 5 Likes

Like Reply



**Martin Aller-Stead**

Maybe we should stick a Senator up as a national symbol. (I'm kidding ... ) You know, Thomas, I bet almost no one would worry if THEY went extinct.

But then we'd be stuck with a Harper oligarchy ... and the soul of Canada would be destroyed.

1 week ago in reply to Thomas R 4 Likes

Like Reply



**Brucejamieson**

Surely we have more pressing matters to deal with than a make work project that will have zero effect on the countries economy, security or government excesses. What a colossal waste of time.

BJ in Port Moody

1 week ago 16 Likes

Like Reply



**Drag-&#39;n-Fly**

Hudson's Bay most-likely paid ...oops, 'lobbied' the beaver as the national animal. Perhaps Coca Cola is now paying... bah 'lobbying' the government just in time for their new can to hit fridges and shops across the country. Just pick a damned Canadian Goose since I think Canada is the only country to have geese and not eat them. Or would that be a conflict of interest with the "Northern Reflections" clothing chain. Heck, are they still in business anyways? Cheers, Go geese!

1 week ago 5 Likes

Like Reply



**Debron22**

Sounds like she just doesn't like beavers since they disrupt her precious dock. Who was there first -her or the beavers? She's encroaching on their territory.

1 week ago 22 Likes

Like Reply



**Chansenfinney**

Yep.. and she's probably tired of the same old beaver/dock jokes being told around the campfires all summer long. So not cool for her to use public time and energy in an effort to make her summer social scene less tedious. Long live the Beaver!!

1 week ago in reply to Debron22 15 Likes

Like Reply



**100avenue**

If I were to draw a caricature of a beaver I would use the Senator's face...it does resemble the Canada beaver.

1 week ago 5 Likes

Like Reply



**gottabesaid**

"The animal is a far more stately symbol than the beaver, Eaton says, one that sends a message that we will defend the true North strong and free: "If you think of the Prime Minister, there's a strong image he makes of the polar bear being a strong navigator."

Wait, what? Stephen Harper reminds her of a polar bear, therefore we should make the polar bear our national symbol? Am I reading that right? If so... Conservative 'PMSH worship' has reached a creepy new level.

Somebody, please tell me I'm reading that wrong.

1 week ago 17 Likes

Like Reply



**gtrplyr055**

I weep for the slow demise of polar bears. I won't be doing the same for Our Glorious Leader when his time comes.

1 week ago in reply to gottabesaid 13 Likes

Like Reply



**Klem**

And neither will he for you.

1 week ago in reply to gtrplyr055 2 Likes

Like Reply



**gtrplyr055**

Good. I don't really care.

1 week ago in reply to Klem 6 Likes

Like Reply



**Martin Aller-Stead**

Steve doesn't know who you or I are, Klem. And given his track record, I don't think he cares. Unless one of us is a large-time Conservative bag-filler .. THEN he'd care ... right to the edge of his wallet.

1 week ago in reply to Klem 3 Likes

Like Reply



**briguyhfx**

Hmm. At first I thought she was an isolated crackpot. After reading her statements, it feels more like a Harper trial balloon. I knew he hated Trudeau, but this obsession of his to destroy everything Trudeau ever did is getting silly.

1 week ago 18 Likes

Like Reply



**Phillip Martin**, Energy consultant to Government and Industry 35 years experience. International...

The BEAVER is alive and well in every Province in Canada.  
 It promotes nationalism, toughness, persistence and accommodation with other animals.  
 It has always been ideal as a symbol of Canada. Leave it alone. She is one of these people like the National Anthem revisionists who cant stand tradition and history, something that all Canadians are proud of. Go back to sleep in the Senate.  
 Why not deal with real issues like the horrendous situations on Native Reserves in Canada, water and housing troubles, financial mismanagement, obscene salaries for some chiefs while the others starve, deaths by gunfire to both adults and kids like the Manitoba story today. Reserves are a disgrace and shame to Canada. People live in third world conditions and nobody cares.  
 These are REAL issues that the Senate should focus on if they had any intelligence.

1 week ago 25 Likes

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