



True North in  
Canadian public policy

# Commentary

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## Crowning Glory: Monarchy's Little Understood Contribution to Canada's Greatness

*This MLI commentary is based on remarks delivered at the Monarchist League of Canada (Ottawa Branch) in Ottawa on February 22, 2018.*

Brian Crowley

Those who follow public affairs closely will no doubt have noticed this recent news item:

LONDON (The Borowitz Report)—In an unexpected televised address on Saturday, Queen Elizabeth II offered to restore British rule over the United States of America.

Addressing the American people from her office in Buckingham Palace, the Queen said that she was making the offer “in recognition of the desperate situation you now find yourselves in.”

“This two-hundred-and-forty-year experiment in self-rule began with the best of intentions, but I think we can all agree that it didn't end well,” she said.

The Queen urged Americans to write in her name on Election Day, after which the transition to British rule could begin “with a minimum of bother.”

In deciding whether to take up the Queen's offer to restore the status quo ante bellum, Americans could do a lot worse than to inquire how that other New World democracy, Canada, has fared as a parliamentary monarchy and indeed how monarchy itself has evolved since the days of George III. They, and a lot of Canadians, might

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well be astonished to learn how very different our foundational assumptions are regarding the trappings and symbolism of power and national cohesion and unity, and how one might well be able to argue that Canada comes out well from the comparison due in no small part to our continued embrace of monarchy and the institution of the Crown.

To understand the real differences between monarchy and republicanism, it is less necessary to know about constitutions and prerogatives and thrones and legislatures than it is to understand what distinguishes two different casts of mind. Moreover, it is my belief that the dialogue of the deaf that often occurs between monarchists and republicans can be traced chiefly to these different casts of mind, and in particular to the value they attach to experience, to tradition, and to rationalism.

No one, in my opinion, has better drawn the distinction between these two types of mind than Michael Oakeshott (and if you are not familiar with Oakeshott, I commend him to you). Listen to Oakeshott's description of the rationalist mind and see if it evokes for you a certain type of political thinker. He says:

At bottom the Rationalist stands (he always *stands* for something) for independence of mind on all occasions, for thought free from obligation to any authority save the authority of 'reason'...He is the *enemy* of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual. His mental attitude is at once sceptical and optimistic: sceptical because there is no opinion, no habit, no belief, nothing so firmly rooted or so widely held that he hesitates to question it and to judge it by what he calls his 'reason'; optimistic, because the rationalist never doubts the power of his 'reason', when properly applied, to determine the worth of a thing, the truth of an opinion or the propriety of an action... [H]e is something also of an individualist, finding it difficult to believe that anyone who can think honestly and clearly will think differently from himself.

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Of the alternative, traditionalist or small-c conservative cast of mind, by contrast, Oakeshott has this to say:

To be conservative is to prefer the familiar to the unfamiliar, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss. Familiar relationships and loyalties will be preferred to the allure of more profitable attachments; to acquire and to enlarge will be less important than to keep, to cultivate and to enjoy; the grief of loss will be more acute than the excitement of novelty or promise.

...the inclination to enjoy what is present and available is the opposite of ignorance and apathy and it breeds attachment and affection. Consequently, it is averse from change, which appears always, in the first place, as deprivation. A storm which sweeps away a copse and transforms a favourite view, the death of friends, the sleep of friendship, the desuetude of customs of behaviour, the retirement of a favourite clown, involuntary exile, reversals of fortune, the loss of abilities enjoyed and their replacement by oth-

ers — these are changes, none perhaps without its compensations, which the man of conservative temperament unavoidably regrets.

Whatever can this have to do with a discussion of the merits of monarchy vs. republicanism? Why, everything, of course. Each of these casts of mind will, in the modern world, have a different answer to the question of “how ought people to be ruled in a democracy?”

In understanding the different answers, it is important for me to clarify that Oakeshott is NOT saying that the traditionalist is an irrationalist, that he does not believe in the power of the human mind to understand and to solve humanity's problems. On the contrary, he is saying that when we engage in the project of “inventing” institutions from so-called “first principles,” when individuals, committees, constitutional conventions, and even single generations consult only their own experience and knowledge in seeking to solve their problems, the answers they come up with are bound to be less complete, less effective, and less suited to the character and dispositions of the people called to live under them, than the answers that have grown up over generations of hard and careful and controlled experimentation that values the affection in which the tried and true and familiar is held by the population.

To reject out of hand the traditional and the customary and rely only on your own mind and knowledge is not to make your decisions more rational (in the sense that decisions based on a larger amount of proven knowledge are more rational than ones based on less knowledge) but rather less so. This contrast between the “grown” and the “invented” is the key one we need to understand.

If this seems impossibly abstract, let me try and bring it down to earth with the following chicken-and-egg analogy. Which came first: the ordinary speaker of English (or indeed any other natural language) or the grammarian? The rationalist cast of mind is always on the lookout for first or definitional principles by which to judge specific performances or utterances or institutions. There is no more withering criticism in the rationalist lexicon than “what you're doing is not perfectly internally logical and consistent.” In that case, the answer to which came first must be “the grammarian.” Grammarians define the rules of proper speech based on logic and reason, and individual utterances are judged against that standard. Moreover, grammarians are the ones who continually push us to get rid of outmoded usages, inconsistent spellings, etc.

But language was not invented by grammarians. It grew; it grew out of the blooming, buzzing, confusion of attempts by generations of people to communicate with each other. To do so successfully, they needed to develop certain regularities in the way they talked. Language simply IS the existence of these established and shared regularities. After the fact, the grammarians came along and were able to tease out those regularities, to describe them and give them names which we rather inaccurately refer to as the “rules” of grammar. But they did not invent language.

Grammarians are the product of language and not the other way around. Moreover, all attempts to extirpate from language all the irregularities and contradictions, to abandon “grown” language and replace it with “invented” and wholly “rational” languages based on first principles, such as Esperanto, have been abject failures, certainly

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when measured by the number of people who speak them. The traditionalist understands that language *grows* in the tension between the search for rules on the one hand, and the constantly evolving circumstances and experiences of native speakers that the rules can never fully capture and fix for all time on the other. Natural grown language will always be richer, more subtle, and more elusive than is dreamt of in the philosophy of rationalist grammarians and the inventors of rational languages no one speaks.

If that example doesn't help, try this one. A professor I knew told me that in the US Midwest there were two universities built near one another at roughly the same time. In the first, the rationalist planners designed a campus that looked spectacular from the air, with lovely landscaping and curving pathways that gave the whole a pleasing aspect... at least it was pleasing in theory. The problem was that in order to make pathways that looked good and orderly from 30,000 feet, they had to follow routes that were inconvenient and awkward for those on the ground who were using them to try and get to where they needed to go, *which is actually the purpose of pathways*.

The result was that people abandoned the paths and tramped across the lawns, creating pathways that were less pleasing to look at but actually got them where they wanted to go. The campus became a battleground between authorities trying to get people to respect their utopian but impractical "first principles" or "invented" design and the students who were late and needed to get to class.

The other campus, which was under the authority of traditionalists, took a different tack. They built their buildings but held off landscaping for a year or two so that they could observe where students actually wanted to go and the paths that they trod to get there. Once the paths were well established, the university simply paved them over and landscaped around them. The result was not so nice to look at from the air — about which the college authorities cared not a whit — but resulted in a harmonious relationship between those authorities and the students who were trying to get from their dorm to the lecture hall and then the cafeteria. Put another way, the pathways on the campus "grew" out of the needs and experiences of those who had to use them.

So rationalist inventors try to impose their will on the world, which they feel must give up its stubborn attachment to the old and the conventional and acquiesce to the dictates of what they think of as "reason." To their mind, human society is a machine, and its operation can always be tweaked by pulling on the right lever, improving the information technology, or installing a higher performance valve. And if the whole machine is clapped out from age and use, it can be replaced with a new "high performance" model that improves productivity. The fact that people loved the look or feel or sound of the old machine is mere sentimentality that must be ignored in the name of a higher social good. The world, and people, are simply the passive raw material on which abstract reason must leave its impression. And if the cost of a new machine is only the destruction of the attachment to and affection for tradition of which Oakeshott spoke so movingly, why that is no cost at all, for what is the value of mere sentiment or, worse, prejudice, compared to the glories of a logical and well-designed contraption. You can't stop progress, eh!

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Gardeners is the name I give to those who think of society more as a garden than a machine. For them, grown institutions are, on the whole, more effective and held in higher esteem than invented ones. Gardeners are by their nature mindful of the fact that they are not in total control. They are participants and not masters. They must make their peace with the effects of climate, of weather, of soil, of nutrients, and of the life cycle and characteristics of the plants they seek to cultivate. Gardeners know that they can create the conditions in which a garden will flourish, but they cannot overmaster the natural processes on which they depend; you cannot make flowers grow faster by pulling on them. In human terms, this means that while gardeners of institutions apply reason to their work, they must reason knowing the nature of their raw material and its behaviour under different conditions and, more importantly, the limits of their power to shape the world closer to their heart's desire.

Coming back to monarchy vs. republicanism, the two casts of mind I have described (what I will call the gardeners and the inventors) differ on the wellsprings of authority in political institutions. The rationalist inventors will tend to be of the view that institutions derive their legitimacy from their conformity to some set of abstract first principles, such as, say, that all authority derives from the people. The worth of institutions will be judged by how closely they hew to such foundational statements of principle. The traditionalist gardener, by contrast, will be of the view that human action does not proceed from abstract first principles, but from messy and very untheoretical practical experience of what works and has passed the test of time regardless of how it appears to those who value only first principles and not practical success.

Those of you who care about such things will find this distinction redolent of Max Weber, who argued that there were three potential sources of authority (in other words, three reasons why people might feel bound to obey the decisions of their rulers): custom and prescription; charismatic authority; and legal-rational authority of the type where people obey the law because they believe in the principles on which authority may be exercised.

Let's set aside the charismatic form of authority for now, because it is extremely rare and dangerous, although we may come back to it because it is far more likely, in my humble opinion, to emerge in republics than in monarchies.

For now, let us be content to say that the other two forms of authority fit nicely with the two casts of mind I drew from Oakeshott. The traditionalist gardeners are drawn to monarchy that has grown out of custom and has become hallowed by the passage of time; the institution's worth has been proven by the continued willingness of people to live under it even if it might fail some "first principles" test. Rationalist inventors are drawn to the republican model, precisely because it sweeps away the distractions, incoherencies, and cobwebs of the past and allows people to live under institutions they have freely chosen and to whose foundational principles they subscribe. To revert to my language example, this is the difference between those who celebrate slowly-evolving "usage" as the source of the genius of language, and those who are strict and inflexible grammarians who believe that native speakers' attachment to "uncorrected" traditional inconsistencies is a failing of the first order.

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How might we choose between these two different and, in their own way, quite legitimate approaches? In particular, I am going to put to you the case for monarchy and the Crown addressed to the rationalist.

I would start by observing that it is quite incorrect to take as the foundational principle of a democracy, such as Canada's the idea that all authority derives from the people or from some written Constitution approved by them. Indeed, the political and institutional history of the British parliamentary tradition from which we emerged is that there has always been an active initiating power which is counterbalanced by a need to bring the population along. As Leo Amery put it in his *Thoughts on the Constitution*:

From William [the Conqueror's] day onwards the key to our constitutional evolution is to be found in the interaction between the Crown, i.e. the central governing, directing and initiating element in the national life, and the nation in its various 'estates', i.e. classes and communities, as the guardian of its written and unwritten laws and customs. The ambitions or needs of the Crown continually demanded changes in the law which the nation was only prepared to accept after discussion or parley with its representatives and on terms. Out of that parley, progressively more continuous and more intimate as needs increased, and out of those terms, grew our system, as we know it, of Government in and with Parliament, subject to the ever increasing influence of public opinion and to periodic review by the nation as a whole.

Note that on this view the Crown does not have derivative authority, but rather original authority, authority in its own right, as the active element of the constitution that identifies and pursues national objectives. It does not get this authority as a gift from the population. (The population now gets to decide who *exercises* this power and for what purposes, but that is a different matter.)

And out of the interplay between Crown and Parliament, and the need for the first to obtain the consent of the second for its plans, grew a quite unintended (or "grown") consequence, namely, that the personal rule of the wearer of the crown was increasingly hemmed in by the requirements of consent from parliament to the government's ambitions. Without it being our intention, or our plan, or our design (which is to say this result was not "invented" by anyone, but it grew out of the genius of our lived experience), the result has been to take power out of the hands of the sovereign and place it in the hands of ministers of the Crown, who act in the sovereign's name but themselves take responsibility for the actions of the state. Thus the politically accountable institution of the Crown has emerged as by far the greatest and most important part of the monarchy that once rested in the hands of the individual who occupied the throne.

The residual part of the monarchy, the person of the monarch him or herself, now embodies the principle that the sovereign reigns but does not rule. This has enabled the "grown" emergence of a monarch above the political fray, who is untainted by partisan controversy and contention, who symbolises in his or her person the unity of the nation beyond mere political disputes. I would be so bold to say that in an era of identity politics in which the political parties seem ever more bound to try and appeal to voters based on their membership in some group

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or another, whether taxpayers or sexual or racial minorities or veterans or the “middle class,” such a unifying symbolism is sorely needed.

Moreover, it cannot be supplied by a figure who emerges from the very political class that thrives on such division. In many republics (which are “invented” political institutions par excellence), criticism of the president is tantamount to treason, or at least has the flavour of *lèse-majesté*, and this institutional arrangement inevitably clothes mere political leadership in the dignity and glory of the symbols of national existence. Moreover, fixed terms objectively make presidents less accountable than prime ministers, who may fall at any time (Jean Chrétien, a personally successful prime minister, was driven from office not by an election but by the loss of support of his own caucus) without it endangering in any way the continuity of the state or of national life, embodied in the Crown and the person of the monarch. This is no doubt one of the key reasons why, as Frank Buckley has richly documented, monarchy of the Canadian and British type is empirically connected with higher degrees of political freedom and lower degrees of corruption than presidential regimes around the world.

I would also submit that the hereditary principle is essential to the success of any enterprise aiming to remove partisan politics from the person of the head of state. No political process is required to identify and recruit the monarch, although it is now well established that the monarch only sits on the throne with the consent of Parliament (in the UK) or of Ottawa and the provinces in the case of Canada, so it is quite wrong to think of the monarch as some kind of imposition over which we have no control or influence.

I can quote no less an authority on this nationally unifying theme than former Prime Minister Lester Pearson, who said in parliament here in Ottawa:

The crown under the monarchical principle also lends, I think, stability and dignity to our national life, and I am sure that we all agree that that is important in a democratic system based on the free and active play of party controversies. The crown as head of the state and as represented in our country standing above all such controversies, commanding and deserving the respect and loyalty and affection of us all, ensures a more solid and secure foundation for national development than might otherwise be the case under some other form of democratic government.

This nationally unifying aspect of our “grown” monarchy is reinforced by the institution of the Governor General who, since the early 1950s has been invariably a Canadian, endowed with virtually all the powers of the Queen but in addition enjoying powers she does not enjoy within Canada. I would submit that this helps to underline the extent to which the monarchy is an institution whose importance and complexity far transcends the person

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who happens to sit on the throne at any one moment. And while our celebrity-obsessed world may be fixated on the person of the monarch and the members of her family, the importance, the strength, and the flexibility of the monarchy extend far beyond and exceed vastly in importance the question of who the monarch may be at any particular time. Of course I agree that our Elizabethan era has been a golden age of monarchy because of the incomparable commitment of the Queen to her duty and her strength and dignity of character, but the monarchy will be no less vital and desirable under her son or grandson regardless of their personal virtues or foibles.

It is sometimes said that in the Canadian context the unifying symbolism of the Crown is vitiated by the existence of Quebec, for whom the monarchy is a mysterious hold-over from the Conquest and British domination. There may be some small truth to this but it ignores several other important truths equally worthy of our attention.

First, I have carefully underlined the entirely changeable and evolving nature of any traditional or customary institution, whether monarchy, or language, or any other. It can evolve in positive and negative ways. In the case of the relationship between Quebec and the Crown, many of you will know that for generations the Crown was seen as the guarantor of the rights of the French and the Catholics in British North America against both the revolutionary Protestant zeal of the new American republic and the simmering hostility of the growing English-speaking and predominantly Protestant population of what was to become Canada. Indeed one of the chief grievances of the American revolutionaries was the Quebec Act, which sought to embody and protect, as a matter of Imperial policy, the rights of the French and Catholics in the New World. When invited to join in the American Revolution, Quebecers vastly preferred to remain under the Crown.

The hostility of Quebec to the monarchy, to the extent that it truly exists, is itself the product of a decades long effort to re-write history by Quebec nationalists and it will surely not be the last such questioning of history and the monarchy in that province. Who knows what the future holds for the monarchy and its place in the affections of Quebecers? If the past is any guide, such opinions are wildly changeable.

And against the alleged hostility of Quebec toward the monarchy must be weighed the attitudes and feelings of, say, Aboriginal Canadians toward the Crown, especially in an era when reconciliation is the watchword heard on every tongue. Like French Catholics, Aboriginal people historically have treasured the fact that their relationship with the newcomers was defined in written and unwritten agreements with the Crown, embodied in the person of the monarch. Constant appeals by Aboriginal leaders to Buckingham Palace in seeking to vindicate their rights is proof positive, in my view, that the monarchy is again coming into its own as a vital symbol of unity we can ill afford to dispense with. The greatest monarchists of all in Canada today, in my estimation, are Indigenous people.

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I do not believe, however, that this unifying symbolism exhausts in any way the symbolic value of the Queen, nor the justification for Canada sharing a royal family with a number of other countries in the Commonwealth. Chief amongst these other symbolic values is this: because the position of monarch has “grown” out of a long constitutional struggle to tame the hitherto untrammelled powers of the king, all of us over whom Elizabeth reigns are reminded by the institution of *our* monarchy that we emerge from a shared tradition of the rule of law, of the indispensable consent of the governed, of Magna Carta, *habeas corpus*, and a thousand other rights and traditions and customs that have been successfully transplanted to lands far from the place where the original struggles occurred and which nonetheless gave us these inestimable blessings.

Why we should respect and show deference, as we are constantly exhorted to do, to the authority of, say, soulless “invented” international organisations, such as the United Nations, dominated by thuggish regimes and tin-pot dictators who share few of our values, but be embarrassed by our embrace of an international monarchy that gracefully embodies values from which our society sprang and whose enduring worth we should celebrate every day, is a mystery I shall never solve.

But, the rationalist republican “inventor” will inevitably argue, why stick with some hoary old “grown” relic from the past that, no matter what its dwindling list of virtues, could surely be improved upon? Let us put our heads together and invent a rational alternative that eliminates the many defects while preserving the few remaining virtues of monarchy.

This is where we come face to face with the very real limitations of an inventor’s rationalism fixated on reason alone applied to the present, rather than on a gardener’s reason applied to experience that has stood the test of time. For while rationalists like to think that reason honestly applied leads all rational people to the same conclusion, in fact nothing is further from the truth. Far from being a unifying act, trying to invent a “purely Canadian” head of state will lead reasonable people of good will to reach completely different conclusions about what we should do. Even people who might not like monarchy will, in those circumstances, often prefer to stick with what they know, even if it does not inspire them with enthusiasm.

John Fraser, in an article for MLI’s flagship publication, *Inside Policy*, has rightly observed that this is exactly what happened in Australia. He reminds us that:

In 1999, a referendum was held in a country [Australia] that is our closest constitutional cousin, even closer than Britain actually. It is also a country where opinion polls, those limited and often faulty dried chicken bones of today’s High Oracles of a nation’s mood, clearly showed Australians were ready to ditch their version of the Crown. What happened? When it came time to say aye or nay, it was clear that Australians didn’t fancy any more power going into the hands of an already too-powerful-by-a-half, democratically elected, federal prime minister. It turned out that the Australian Crown would do quite nicely, after all.

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That the rationalist will perhaps be offended by the notion that we might stay with what we know because it is *good enough* despite its defects and is superior, taken in the round, to any realistic and practical alternative, should not trouble us in the least. Remember that republics are often born out of revolution, which by definition sweeps away the established order. If you have driven the old regime out, you have the “advantage,” if I can call it that, of not being able to keep it, and you *must* “invent” something new.

Canada, which has enjoyed the inestimable benefit of growing slowly and peacefully without revolutionary interruption, has been able to maintain the tradition of authority flowing from custom and prescription (and the attachment and affection which that engenders) while modernising it through the evolution of parliamentary government in a way that is the envy of the world. And if the Australian experience is anything to go by, the result is a system that works admirably and to which no more acceptable alternative has yet been proposed.

Some (mostly the rationalist inventors among us) find this a deplorable state of affairs. I am not among them, for I am a gardener. I applaud a country whose arrangements for head of state are not the object of political contention, but are widely acquiesced in and work well; that place the symbolism of the dignity and unity of the state beyond the realm of narrow partisan manoeuvring; that proudly display for all to see the scars and remnants of past struggles to end arbitrary rule and protect and honour traditional rights; and that symbolically remind politicians every day that they are not our masters, but indeed are the servants of something far greater than they.

# About the Author



**B**rian Lee Crowley has headed up the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI) in Ottawa since its inception in March of 2010, coming to the role after a long and distinguished record in the think tank world. He was the founder of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) in Halifax, one of the country's leading regional think tanks. He is a former Salvatori Fellow at the Heritage Foundation and a former Senior Fellow at the Galen Institute, both in Washington. In addition, he has advised think tanks in Canada, USA, France, Britain, Brussels and Nigeria.

Crowley has published numerous books, most recently *Northern Light: Lessons for America from Canada's Fiscal Fix*, which he co-authored with Robert P. Murphy and Niels Veldhuis and two bestsellers: *Fearful Symmetry: the fall and rise of Canada's founding values* (2009) and MLI's first book, *The Canadian Century; Moving Out of America's Shadow*, which he co-authored with Jason Clemens and Niels Veldhuis.

Crowley twice won the Sir Antony Fisher Award for excellence in think tank publications for his health care work and in 2011 accepted the award for a third time for MLI's book, *The Canadian Century*.

From 2006–08 Crowley was the Clifford Clark Visiting Economist with the federal Department of Finance. He has also headed the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC), and has taught politics, economics, and philosophy at various universities in Canada and Europe.

Crowley is a frequent commentator on political and economic issues across all media. He holds degrees from McGill and the London School of Economics, including a doctorate in political economy from the latter.



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**CONTACT US:** Macdonald-Laurier Institute  
323 Chapel Street, Suite #300  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
K1N 7Z2

**TELEPHONE:** (613) 482-8327

**WEBSITE:** [www.MacdonaldLaurier.ca](http://www.MacdonaldLaurier.ca)

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*In its mere five years of existence, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, under the erudite Brian Lee Crowley's vibrant leadership, has, through its various publications and public events, forged a reputation for brilliance and originality in areas of vital concern to Canadians: from all aspects of the economy to health care reform, aboriginal affairs, justice, and national security.*

BARBARA KAY, NATIONAL POST COLUMNIST

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*Intelligent and informed debate contributes to a stronger, healthier and more competitive Canadian society. In five short years the Macdonald-Laurier Institute has emerged as a significant and respected voice in the shaping of public policy. On a wide range of issues important to our country's future, Brian Lee Crowley and his team are making a difference.*

JOHN MANLEY, CEO COUNCIL

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