



Christmas is Christmas

By John Robson
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Well, it's time to wish everyone a Merry Christmas ... and damn the torpedoes, I'm tempted to add — if it ain't out of keeping with the situation.

I realize this point has been made before (including by me on Dec. 20, 2002, if you're keeping score). But there is an important place for repetition in life now including not only putting up a Christmas tree but adding a sign saying "This is a Christmas tree." We also need to insist that those greetings you only get in December are Christmas cards (or, sometimes, Hannukah ones) given that those that emanated from the Governor General, the prime minister and the leader of Her Majesty's Official Opposition at this festive season depicted ... a different season. One without snow. (See the following pages.)

I cannot see the value of this pandering subterfuge. There's only one reason for sending these cards now and everyone from Tiny Tim to Ebenezer Scrooge knows what it is. So those who dislike Christmas will not be deceived by the camouflage and those who like it will not be impressed by it.

Then why deck part of the hall with boughs of surly over the fact that if Dec. 25 is not Christmas it's just a cold grim grey Saturday, and if the holiday that must not be named is not Christmas no one knows what it is? Because we should reflect briefly, before getting into the bowl of hot punch or some other adult beverage, on the deeper meaning of the strangely powerful impulse to clutter up the calendar with false dates while cleansing it of real ones.

Let me stuff a few recent examples into your stocking. In late October, I got a press release attempting pathetically to immortalize the thoughts of our minister of state for science and technology on the conclusion of National Science and Technology Week.

Just as, pace Lincoln, calling a cow's tail a leg does not make that ruminant a quintuped, calling the period on the calendar ending Friday Oct. 22 National Science and Technology Week does not make it so (nor, parenthetically, does claiming "In 2007, Prime Minister Stephen Harper introduced Canada's Science and Technology Strategy" mean one of those exists either).

Calling Oct. 3 to 9 Fire Prevention Week also does not make it one. And I don't just say that because I lit a fire during that period, albeit with some difficulty. Nor, I am quite

certain, did anyone without a vested interest in the matter suppose October was Renovation Month or that there is such a thing.

This impulse is comic. But it is not innocent. Julius Caesar's decision to give himself a month was certainly cause for alarm (mind you he should have renamed March given what the people he alarmed did to him on the Ides of it). And Augustus' vigorous denials that he was anything more than first citizen would have been more believable if he hadn't bagged August.

It is a sign of demented metaphysical ambition to believe that just because you are, for instance, in uneasy control of Turkmenistan you can remake the fundamental conditions of human life. In case you have forgotten his attempt to prove something can be sinister and ludicrous at the same time, Turkmenistan's erstwhile ruler Saparmurat Niyazov started by renaming himself Turkmenbashi or "Father of all Turkmens," then renamed a town, a meteor and January for himself and April and bread for his mother before creating a national holiday in honour of melons, banning car radios and lip-synching and gold teeth and extending adolescence until age 25. And Saddam Hussein decided his 65th birthday would last a year.

Mind you it doesn't always work; Nero attempted to relabel April Neroneous before his associates relabelled him "here lies Nero." And, while Turkmenbashi decreed that old age didn't start until 85, he died at 66 anyway. Likewise Idi Amin crowning himself king of Scotland didn't let him rename haggis or make Robbie Burns day a year long.

Obviously we don't live under Nero or Saddam. But the idea that we can remove from the calendar many things ordinary people have long known were there, like Christmas, and then clutter it up with things that don't exist, like Fire Prevention Week, is a minor key version of the same deranged desire to remake life through the power of the state to coerce you or at least make you pay to be nagged.

When real things happen, like celebrating Christmas on Dec. 25 or extending adolescence well into middle age in the West, it's because ordinary people actually live that way, not because governments can make us celebrate melons, live longer or avoid dental work by gnawing bones.

We can fight back by observing Talk Like a Pirate Day (Sept. 19) or INTERNATIONAL CAPS LOCK DAY (Oct. 22). But the best way to strike a blow for common sense is simply to insist that the thing with the ornaments is a Christmas tree, and using any Season's Greeting card showing summer to light what is, unmistakably, a Yule Log.

John Robson's column appears Fridays.

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