

The Wrath of Grapes: Don Cherry and the Militarization of Hockey

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by

John L. Nater
PhD Candidate
jnater@uwo.ca

The University of Western Ontario

and

Robert Maciel
PhD Candidate
rmaciel@uwo.ca

The University of Western Ontario

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Abstract:

This paper considers Don Cherry's use of language to create an understanding of Canadian identity based on an unquestioning patriotism and pride in country imbued by a strong support for the military and armed service personnel. This paper is based on an analysis of the 2009-10 regular NHL season. Through a content analysis of the text of Cherry's coach's corner segments, this paper argues that Cherry's view of Canadian nationalism reflects George Grant's commentary on British nationalism in his Lament for a Nation. While this paper does not attempt to pass judgment on the value of Cherry's views, it does argue that his views are at odds with Canada's understanding of multiculturalism.

Introduction:

Whether it be Paul Henderson's famous goal in 1972 or the more infamous Richard Riots of 1955, the sport of hockey has grafted itself onto many understandings of Canadian identity. This is not to imply that Canada's self-understanding of its identity is one of a stereotypical hockey-playing, Tim Hortons-drinking character that is so often parodied. Rather, this paper suggests that the sport of hockey, through the personage or character of Don Cherry has come to be linked to a broader understanding of Canadian identity.

This paper considers whether and how Don Cherry's Coach's Corner segments provide an understanding of Canadian identity through the lens of hockey analysis. It is hypothesized that the language used by Don Cherry during his *Coach's Corner* segments serves to build an understanding of identity predicated on the fusion and symbiotic relationship between the sport of hockey and the military. This paper does not seek to pass judgment on Cherry's political views. The intent is rather to illicit the examples and the ways in which Canadian identity is moulded and constructed around the understanding of hockey, the military and nationalism.

Context:

Why would a paper on Canadian identity choose a former NHL coach and hockey commentator as a case study? Don Cherry was not chosen because he is a hockey commentator, rather he was chosen because he represents a character whose comments appear to go beyond simply the sport of hockey. While many Canadians would remember Don Cherry as the coach of the NHL's Boston Bruins, he is more recently known for his nearly three decades worth of loud suits and louder commentary on his weekly *Coach's Corner* segments.

Don Cherry is not the only hockey commentator who happens to hold views or make comments that some would consider controversial. But for whatever reason, his character is one that has been lauded as promoting what it means to be Canadian. In the 2004 CBC television series, *The Greatest Canadian*, Don Cherry was ranked at number 7 – ahead of both the inventor of the telephone and the first Prime Minister of Canada; and was only narrowly bettered by a

Nobel Peace Prize winner.¹ While it is important not to read too much into the results of a reality-style television program, the fact that he made the top ten at all is reflective of the following he has generated among hockey fans and Canadians. According to the ratings released by BBM Canada, Hockey Night in Canada (HNIC) regularly ranks in the top ten programs viewed by Canadians; often with a viewership of over 2,000,000 people per Saturday night.² As a point of comparison, the first game of HNIC – which includes Coach’s Corner – is consistently viewed by a larger audience than the second game without Coach’s Corner. For example, on April 10, 2010, the first game garnered an audience of just under 2.3 million viewers while the second game managed to attract just over 1.3 million viewers.³ With this quantity of viewership, HNIC outpaced powerhouses such as *24*, the CTV National News, and fellow sporting event, the Masters.⁴ While the weekly audience and position of HNIC within these rankings fluctuates, it is consistently one of the top-viewed television attractions in Canada.

The size of Cherry’s potential viewership alone is significant, but more significant still is the independent following that exists outside of his formal role on HNIC. For example, in 2006, he met with Prime Minister Stephen Harper and was recognized by the Speaker of the House of Commons following Question Period.⁵ The following year, he was made an honorary member of the Royal Canadian Legion, an honour that has in the past been reserved for individuals such as former Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King and President Dwight D. Eisenhower.⁶ Following the death of his wife, Rose, Don Cherry spearheaded an effort to open a hospice in her name to help children and their families with cancer. Indeed, the profits from the sale of the Don Cherry “Bubba” beer kegs went to finance the construction of the Rose Cherry House.⁷ All this is to show that Don Cherry is not simply a hockey commentator, nor should he be viewed through that lens alone. This paper suggests that his subject matter is more than hockey and his audience extends beyond the hockey community.

Methodology:

This paper is based primarily on written transcripts of Don Cherry’s Coach’s Corner segments for the 2009-2010 NHL regular season. These transcripts were prepared and transcribed by the authors based on the publicly available video recordings on the HNIC website.

¹ “Father of medicare ‘greatest’: Douglas tops CBC’s canuck debate,” CANOE-CNEWS, accessed April 28, 2011, <http://cnews.canoe.ca/CNEWS/Canada/Canadiana/2004/11/30/741515.html>

² “2009-10 National Top Program Reports Archive,” BBM Canada, accessed April 17, 2011, http://bbm.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=108&Itemid=108

³ “Top Programs – Total Canada (English),” BBM Canada, accessed April 17, 2011, http://www.bbm.ca/documents/top_30_tv_programs_english/2010/nat04052010.pdf

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ “Cherry cheered, booed at House of Commons,” CBC News, accessed April 17, 2011, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2006/11/07/cherry-parliament.html>

⁶ “Royal Canadian Legion honouring Don Cherry,” CBC Sports, accessed April 17, 2011, <http://www.cbc.ca/sports/hockey/story/2007/07/10/nhl-rcl-cherry.html>

⁷ “Controversy on tap for Don Cherry beer ads,” CTV News, accessed April 17, 2011, http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/CTVNewsAt11/20030508/cherry_molson_ads_030508/

Since CBC does not offer a transcription service for its programs, these transcripts were not professionally developed. While the authors took care to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts, they recognize that errors may have been made which could have an effect – albeit minor – on the analysis undertaken in this paper.

This paper has chosen to limit its focus to the 2009-2010 NHL regular season and does not include the playoffs. While some references are made to segments from the post-season, these have not been included in the textual analysis. The decision to exclude the post-season segments was due to the issue of consistency. While the regular season segments occurred at regular weekly intervals, the post-season segments were often a mere two days apart. In addition, the post-season segments were as much as one half the length of the regular season segments. These two issues were seen as a possible impediment to ensuring a consistent approach both to the quantitative and qualitative analysis contained in this paper.

The analysis of this paper is divided into two main sections. First, a theoretical understanding is offered on the subject of Canadian identity and nationalism. This draws on the work of a number of Canadian scholars and positions the current case study within the broader literature on this subject. The second section applies this theoretical understanding to the language used by Don Cherry during his weekly Coach's Corner segments. Two approaches have been selected to complete this analysis. First, a content analysis program has been employed to provide a quantitative measurement of the words and phrases used by Cherry in his hockey analysis. This is intended to demonstrate whether Cherry's language does venture beyond hockey into the realm of discussions on military and nationalism. To support this measure, a second analysis is undertaken in which the context of Cherry's language is reviewed. For this, the transcripts from the Coach's Corner segments are analysed and comparisons are made between Cherry's use of language in providing hockey commentary and his use of language in paying tribute to members of the Canadian Forces and police forces.

This paper concludes by suggesting that Don Cherry, like George Grant before him, is constructing an understanding of Canadian identity that exists in ideal form only. While support for the military and certain traditions within Canada have remained strong among many, the emergence of a multicultural state in both a legal and cultural sense conflict with Cherry's nationalist articulations. While not condemning Cherry for his attempt to articulate a narrative on Canadian identity, the content of this identity may not reflect that of present-day Canada.

Hockey and Canadian Identity:

Attempting to study Canadian identity often proves itself to be a difficult task. Canadians are noted for identifying as simply, and possibly most importantly, not American. Although this is a seemingly flippant remark it has bled into the theoretical literature surrounding identity in Canada. George Grant, a noted Canadian political thinker wrote in his most well-known work that Canadians need to be wary of Americanization. Grant was deeply concerned with the loss of

any true Canadian identity and ultimately the loss of Canadian sovereignty to Americans.⁸ At the same time, though, Grant was portraying a traditional, British, or ‘Red Tory’ nationalism. He beseeched the Liberal Party for bending to the whims of corporate interests. Grant was writing at an odd time for Canada. It was a transition from an old British Nationalism where the country was much more closely tied to the crown, the rise of Pierre Elliot Trudeau was just on the horizon and with it the supposed age of multiculturalism which would come, as some would argue, to be the new hallmark of Canadian identity. Put into this context it is possible to see the origins of Grant’s concerns, but he does not offer much in the way of understanding contemporary identity. Nor can Grant really speak to the immense diversity within this country; instead his comments tend to represent small areas of Ontario. Attempting to conceive of an identity in this society is going to be understandably difficult, then. Apart from sharing the same flag, what do Quebecois and Manitobans have in common? John Ibbitson in his *The Polite Revolution* addresses this issue, claiming that Canada is a country of four solitudes.⁹ Forming a cohesive identity in Canada, then, is understandably immensely difficult.

There are a multitude of ethnic and cultural groups that somehow peacefully co-exist in Canada. Understanding how this work comprises an entire body of literature is far beyond the scope of this project, but a few words are required here. The Canadian multicultural society works for various reasons, but as Will Kymlicka has shown, allowing cultural groups to publically participate in society leads to higher odds that peace, stability, and most importantly, identification with the state will occur.¹⁰ This is especially interesting considering the calls for assimilation that are continually heard when a tough case involving a cultural minority are brought public. In the more famous – or infamous – instances, minority groups have claimed a right that appears to be at odds with a deeply held public belief or tradition. For example, a Sikh officer’s claim to wear a turban rather than the required and traditional headgear for an RCMP officer is based on a claim to freedom of religion.¹¹ What this has led to, then, is a variety of symbols that represent Canadian identity. Gone are most of the old world symbols of Canada – the Crown, the Stetson, and the Hudson Bay Company. To some this is problematic, but one symbol remains strong – hockey. Hockey is without a doubt inseparably tied to Canadian identity. Despite the fact that the sport’s historical origins are not fully understood “...it is generally believed that the game was created by Canadian children in response to the persistent freezing temperatures of Canadian winters.”¹² Moreover “the extent of organization of the minor hockey system in Canada should provide a strong clue to its level of importance in maintaining

⁸ Andrew Potter, “Introduction,” in *Lament for a nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism 40th Anniversary Edition*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), xiii.

⁹ John Ibbitson, *The Polite Revolution*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 2005), 56-93; esp. 57.

¹⁰ For example, he argues that integration is still the goal but ethnic groups are attempting to revise the terms of integration so that it is possible to hold an ethnic identity. See: Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 97-98.

¹¹ Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1994), 46-51.

¹² Howard L. Nixon, “Growing up with Hockey in Canada.” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 11 (1976): 38.

the hockey tradition in Canadian society. The existence of this minor hockey league system has also had a significant impact on the family life, attitudes, values, and career aspirations of those associated with it.”¹³ Hockey is a central factor in Canadian identity. Further, it can be argued that hockey is a main carrier of cultural citizenship in Canada.

HNIC, the weekly broadcast on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is the longest running program in Canada.¹⁴ HNIC has a long history in Canada and “to fully understand HNIC’s place in Canadian life...one must go back to the early days of both the NHL and Canadian broadcasting” where Canadian fans took substantial pride in the strength of the Montreal Canadiens and the Toronto Maple Leafs.¹⁵ As the twentieth century continued, the television broadcast grew into one of the most popular Canadian television events. Particularly popular is the Coach’s Corner segment which sometimes will hold a larger audience than the game itself.¹⁶ Due to its overwhelming popularity in this country, some have argued that HNIC is a carrier of Canadian cultural citizenship: “...NHL hockey is a cultural tradition that has brought many Canadians together over the years... [and it] contributed mightily to the popular experience of Canada as a national community in the post-war years.”¹⁷ Moreover, Robidoux goes so far as to argue that hockey plays a central role in establishing Canada as a nation distinct from Britain.

Distinguishing itself from Britain and the United States has been a central part of Canadian identity. In the early years, Canada was marked with the traditional features of a British colonial power, and some of the vestiges of colonialism remain – the Queen remains the head of state, the Union Jack remains an integral symbol of the state, and the names of countless cities, towns and streets continue to reflect Canada’s British ties. However, throughout the Trudeau years, it could be argued that Canada shed itself of its colonial image. This was problematic for some, most notably being George Grant, who (while writing before the Trudeau years) saw British nationalism dying out in Canada. Grant, a Canadian political thinker, wrote his important *Lament for A Nation* as a final battle cry for Canadian sovereignty. Grant saw Canadian sovereignty being swallowed up by the American capitalist machine. He states: “This lament mourns the end of Canada as a sovereign state. Political laments are not usual in the age of progress, because most people think that society always moves forward to better things.”¹⁸ Importantly, he is focusing Canadian identity as solely a British brand of North American life:

We were grounded in the wisdom of Sir John A. Macdonald, who saw plainly more than a hundred years ago that the only threat to nationalism was from the South, not from across the sea. To be a Canadian was to build, along with the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jay Scherer & David Whitson. “Public Broadcasting, Sport, and Cultural Citizen: The Future of Sport on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation?” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 44 (2009): 215.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 216

¹⁷ Ibid., 224

¹⁸ George Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, (Toronto: The Canadian Publishers, 1965), 2.

French, a more ordered and stable society than the liberal experiment in the United States.¹⁹

Grant was writing, arguably, in a transitional period for Canadian nationalism. Ties to the Crown were weakening and there was a potential to enter a vacuous space lacking true identity only to fully embrace American values as our own. The alternative identity did not arise or cement itself until the 1970s and 1980s when Trudeau began to transform Canada into a multicultural nation. Nonetheless, he maintains that British nationalism was the only nationalism that could save Canada. He states: “That we never broke with Great Britain is often said to prove that we are not a nation but a colony. But the great politicians who believed in this connection...did not see it this way, but rather as a relation to the font of constitutional government in the British Crown. Many Canadians saw it as a means of preserving at every level of our life – religious, educational, political, social – certain forms of existence that distinguish us from the United States.”²⁰ Quite apparently, Grant was deeply concerned with the state of Canadian identity in the 1960s.

Hockey remains one of the strongest forms of cultural identity in this country. The popularity of Canadian teams and the unification that is produced throughout the country from watching the Canadian national team compete in the Vancouver Winter Olympics is a testament to this fact. What is somewhat ironic with having hockey as one of the main cultural monikers of Canada is, as Allain points out the contradiction of “...Canada’s position as ‘unreasonably polite’ and our relationship to the sometimes violent and aggressive sport of elite level men’s ice hockey...”²¹ Ice hockey, as is evident from a single game, is a traditionally masculine game – reinforcing traditional masculine roles. Appeals to traditional masculine roles in talks of nationalism are used frequently. Don Cherry continually relies on these types of appeals. As well, George Grant argued that Diefenbaker (who he considered to be the last bastion of Canadian nationalism) showed valiant courage in fighting for re-election, which Grant states is “...something the wealthy and clever rarely understand...”²² Allain further shows how Don Cherry personifies this contradiction: “[Cherry] has an understanding that hockey players (good ol’ Canadian boys) are to be humble and well-dressed men off the ice and vicious competitors on the ice.”²³ Cherry is particularly partial to Canadian players and presents them, generally, in a very positive light. Moreover, it is presumed that being a good Canadian requires this type of mentality – polite and gracious but with willingness to fight and act overly aggressive if needed.

Cherry holds a very strong, and very public, political opinion. His speech at Toronto Mayor Rob Ford’s inauguration was very strongly worded. For example, Cherry opened by

¹⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

²⁰ Ibid., 71-2.

²¹ Allain, Kristi A, “Kid Crosby or Golden Bow: Sidney Crosby, Canadian National Identity, and the Policing of Hockey Masculinity,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, .46 (2011): 9.

²² Grant, 2; Importantly throughout the book he conflates the wealthy class with the liberal party, bending to the whims of corporate interest.

²³ Allain, 9.

sarcastically remarking on his vibrant pink jacket: “Well actually I’m wearing pinko for all the pinkos out there that ride bicycles and everything.”²⁴ He continues: “I’m being ripped to shreds by the left-wing pinko newspapers out there. It’s unbelievable. One guy called me a jerk in a pink suit, so I thought I’d wear that for him too, today.”²⁵ Cherry’s apparent right-wing voice appeals to a particular brand of conservatism that may be seen at odds with the other image of Canada. This is an issue that resonates with a contemporary reading of Grant’s work. Neither of these individuals speaks exclusively for Canada, nor represents a realistic portrait of Canada in their work, but both appeal to a basic ethno-nationalism. Interestingly enough, both were very sympathetic to and supportive of the Canadian military. Grant states, in what could as easily be in Cherry’s words: “The best British and Canadian youth had their guts torn out in the charnel house of the First World War. To write of the collapse of Western Europe is not my purpose here, but one small result was to destroy Great Britain as an alternative pull in Canadian life.”²⁶ Alternatively, on a broadcast from May 2010, Cherry states – in relation to a picture of Canadian soldiers – that

These [soldiers] are the greatest guys in the world. These guys are overseas in Afghanistan. I hope they’re watching now. Look at them. We got a close-up of every one of them and these guys are over there now. God love them, they’re the best guys in the world. Look at them, eh. Look at them. Aren’t they something.²⁷

Additionally, we can see both figures as strong voices, albeit only one academic voice, speaking out against the left-wing movement in this country. Cherry is known for flippantly over-emphasizing the state of political correctness in Canada. In the same broadcast as above he states: “I hate to end it on the Union Jack, but I don’t want to offend anybody. You people of Ontario, you won’t recognize this, it’s the Ontario flag.”²⁸ This position, however, seems to be at odds with a majority of views in Canada, which has traditionally held more liberal views on the role of the state in society.

Some may consider Cherry’s views to have been implicitly, and at times explicitly, biased. That is, he is staunchly in favour of ‘good Canadian boys’, who are more often than not Canadian-born, white, males who fulfill traditional masculine roles; they’re the tough guys on the ice. He has, in the past, spoken out against and belittled French-Canadians, Europeans, and most notably, Russians. Most of his commentary here has revolved around the use of a visor in hockey, pejoratively claiming that only Russians and other Europeans need visors. Again, Cherry’s views appeal to a particular base, however they are at odds with social scientific

²⁴ “Audio and Full Text: Don Cherry, Rob Ford Speeches at City Hall,” The National Post, accessed April 15, 2011, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2010/12/07/audio-don-cherry-rob-ford-at-city-hall/>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Grant, 72.

²⁷ Don Cherry, *Coach’s Corner*, first broadcast 10 May 2010 by CBC.

²⁸ Ibid.

evidence that shows Canadian attitudes towards foreigners. For example, Keith Banting recently showed that "...while attitudes towards immigration vary with the economic cycle, weakening during recessions, there seems to be no long-term trend towards greater resistance to immigration. Viewed from this perspective, the country seems to have found a sustainable equilibrium among support for immigration, multiculturalism and the welfare state."²⁹ Moreover, Kymlicka has posited that solidarity with immigrants is high in Canada. He states: "Yet what is truly striking is the high level of mutual identification among immigrants and native-born Canadians. Canadians view immigrants and demographic diversity as key parts of their own Canadian identity... This high level of mutual identification is also reflected in the fact that whereas ethnic diversity has been shown to erode social capital or trust in other countries, there appears to be a "Canadian exceptionalism" in this regard..."³⁰ Thus it can be said that while Cherry presents a specific brand of nationalism, it cannot be said to be representative of the majority of Canadians' opinions. Rather, he is presenting what appears to be a minority opinion, at least when confronted with Banting and Kymlicka's evidence.

Cherry, then, could be seen as appealing to an old-world British nationalism that doesn't resonate with today's Canada. However, HNIC is extraordinarily popular with his Coach's Corner segment receiving a very wide viewership. While it is apparent that some (if not most) of his popularity arises from his views on hockey, his political commentary is of importance too. However, it should be noted that his political commentary is, in many ways, conflated with his hockey commentary, as discussed below.

Language, Identity and Nationalism in Coach's Corner:

Don Cherry is a master of language. Not in the sense of Shakespeare or in a literary sense, but in a basic, guttural appeal. While he often speaks in incomplete sentences and fails to complete his sentences, the impact and effect of his language cannot be underestimated. The previous section of this paper provided a theoretical framework in which the competing concepts of Canadian nationalism are articulated. This section examines the language used by Cherry during his Coach's Corner segments and presents how this language fits into the framework. This section centres on two key analyses. First, the actual language, words, and phrases used by Cherry during Coach's corner are discussed. This provides a quantitative narrative of the types of words and the intermingling of these words during what is nominally billed as a hockey program. The second part of this section presents the context in which these words and phrases are used. Here, this paper presents the ways in which Cherry applies the language of military to hockey and the language of hockey to the military. Beyond this, Cherry's idolization of Canadian hockey players could be understood as promoting an Anglo-Saxon reflection of Canadian identity at the expense of— or the exclusion of — other understandings.

²⁹ Keith Banting, "Is There a Progressive's Dilemma in Canada?," *The Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 43(2010): 805.

³⁰ Will Kymlicka, "Testing the Liberal Multicultural Hypothesis," *The Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 43(2010): 263.

Table 1.1 Language Usage by Don Cherry during Coach’s Corner

Phrase	Frequency
Good Canadian boy	3
Good [town/city] boy	12
War	4
Battle	4
Soldier	6
Beautiful	33
Fight/Fights/Fighting	47
Troops	12
Hockey	47
Coach	32
Honour	7
Princess Pat’s	9
Loyal Edmonton Regiment	2
Combat Engineer Regiment	1
Leafs	11
Bruins	4

Table 1.1 shows the frequency of a variety of words common in Cherry’s commentary. Despite the fact that Cherry’s segment is depicted as a commentary on the sport of hockey, his usage of terms related to hockey could be considered to be surprisingly few. During the 2009-2010 season, Cherry mentions the word “hockey” only 47 times and the word “coach” only 32 times. This is in spite of the fact that Cherry’s segment is titled “Coach’s Corner” on a show titled “Hockey Night in Canada.” This stands in contrast to words that would be less linked to the game of hockey and more linked to the military and warfare. Cherry uses the word “troops” a total of 12 times during the season. This is in addition to his use of the word “soldiers” six times and “battle” four times. Cherry also mentions “war” four times during this season.

Combined, these types of military words represent 26 mentions by Don Cherry during the hockey season. Considering that there were only twenty-seven Coach’s Corner segments during the regular season, Cherry’s use of clear military language was, on average, used nearly once in every episode. With a segment that averages between seven and eight minutes per week, Cherry is met with a limited amount of time during which to offer commentary. The fact that language linked to the military is used in relatively large numbers may be understood as a conscious effort on Cherry’s part to highlight the importance of the military in his understanding of either hockey or Canada or both.

As a coach, Don Cherry is most frequently remembered for his time as the head coach of the Boston Bruins. However, during the 2009-2010 season, Cherry refers to the “Bruins” only four times. This is in contrast to the Leafs, which he mentions 11 times during the season. While one might read into this a view that Cherry holds a bias to certain NHL teams, what is of

more import for this paper is the number of times he refers to military organizations. The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry – or the Princess Pat's – is mentioned 11 times during the season with an additional two and one references to the Loyal Edmonton Regiment and Combat Engineer Regiment respectively. From a quantitative standpoint, it is clear that Cherry has a tendency to mention Canadian military regiments on as many occasions as he does an NHL team.

On a number of occasions, Cherry will show paraphernalia that has been presented to him by members of the armed forces or police services.³¹ The display of these items does not appear to always correspond with Cherry's tributes to a fallen soldier or a police officer; however, there are direct linkages in some cases. Prior to a tribute to Constable Vu Pham of the Ontario Provincial Police, Cherry displays a tie and cufflinks that he notes were given to him by then-Commissioner of the Ontario Provincial Police, Julian Fantino.³² In a similar vein, while paying tribute to a deceased member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Cherry notes that his own grandfather had been a member of the Northwest Mounted Police.³³ Finally, in the final Coach's Corner segment prior to Christmas 2009, a clip is shown of soldiers serving in Afghanistan wishing Don Cherry a Merry Christmas and singing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas."³⁴

While these three examples may represent Cherry's attempts to add a personal flavour to his broadcasts, there is also an element of linkages to his understanding of Canadian identity. If, as this paper hypothesizes, Cherry promotes a brand of Canadian nationalism predicated on strong traditional ties and support for the military and armed services, the personal, familial, and honorary connections highlighted by Cherry feed into and exalt that particular understanding. By so doing, Cherry not only pays tribute to fallen soldiers or police officers, but also places himself within the tributes. As such, he perpetuates the view that when he speaks, he is speaking not only as a detached observer, but as someone intimately connected to the events on which he is reporting and commenting. It is noted that when Cherry pays tribute to fallen soldiers or police officers, his voice often cracks, especially when referring to the deceased's family members or their young age. This paper will not critique the emotion displayed by Cherry in so doing, but it does offer this observation that shows a way in which Cherry can be seen as being intimately connected to the deceased.

While the words that Don Cherry uses are important, the words that he neglects to use also demonstrate a certain perspective. Throughout the season, Cherry refers to a variety of individuals as a "Canadian boy," "a good Canadian boy," or a "good [city/town] boy." The only situation in which these types of phrases are used to describe a non-Canadian hockey player was on October 17, 2009 in which Cherry refers to Michael Del Zotto as a "good Irish boy"; despite

³¹ See for example the Coach's Corner segments first broadcast 31 October 2009, 7 November 2009 and 12 March 2010.

³² Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 13 March 2010 by CBC.

³³ Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 23 January 2010 by CBC.

³⁴ Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 19 December 2009 by CBC.

Del Zotto's Italian ancestry.³⁵ However, in all other circumstances, Cherry refers to players by their country, town, or city – but only when the country is Canada, and the towns or cities are Canadian cities. For example, on March 20, 2010, Cherry congratulated Nick Boynton for providing support to a teammate by referring to him as a “good Nobleton boy.”³⁶ In another example, on October 24, 2009 Cherry comments that Jonathon Toews ought to have gotten up after a hit because he was a “good Canadian boy.”³⁷ In another segment in which Cherry congratulates Matt Molson on scoring two short-handed goals, Cherry notes that he's a “North York boy.”³⁸ While Cherry is quick to reference the hometown of a Canadian player, he is less likely to do so for a player of foreign heritage.

On March 6, 2010, despite lauding Boston Bruins goaltender Tim Thomas for having “saved the day,” Cherry makes no mention of his nationality.³⁹ Certainly, there appears to be no thought given to referring to Thomas as a “good Michigan boy” or a “good boy from Flint.” This is despite Thomas' noted skill and the fact that he plays for Cherry's beloved Boston Bruins. This type of designation is left only to those of Canadian nationality and origin. In fact, the nationalities of most hockey players mentioned by Cherry are rarely noted at all. In one instance, it almost appears as though Cherry surprises himself by speaking positively of a foreign player. On March 20, 2010, after sympathizing with Ovechkin over a hit that cost him a two game suspension, Cherry mentions, “so, here I am sticking up for Ovechkin.”⁴⁰ For Cherry, it could be argued that hockey players are either Canadian or not. There is no possibility of a different origin for a good hockey player.

As spoken to in the preceding section, Canadian ethnicity is widely varied. However, when confronted with the evidence here, it can be observed that Cherry is focusing his attention on ‘traditional’ Canadian ethnicities. ‘Traditional’ Canadian ethnicities are those from Western Europe (especially the United Kingdom). Cherry is furthering this mentality with his focus on traditional ethnicities through his use of “good Canadian boy”. He rarely uses that term to describe someone of a ‘non-traditional’ descent, with the possible exception of Nasem Kadri, a Canadian-born player of Lebanese descent. The problem is that Cherry is limiting what counts as Canadian to a very small portion of the overall population. Demographic data shows that seven of the top 10 source countries for permanent residents in Canada between the years 2007 and 2009 are from ‘non-traditional’ countries (China being the highest source followed by the Philippines and India; Pakistan, Iran, Korea, and Morocco round out the list).⁴¹

³⁵ Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 17 October 17 2009 by CBC.

³⁶ Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 20 March 2010 by CBC.

³⁷ Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 24 October 2009 by CBC.

³⁸ Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 31 October 2009 by CBC.

³⁹ Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 6 March 2010 by CBC.

⁴⁰ Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 20 March 2010 by CBC.

⁴¹ “Facts and Figures 2009 – Immigration Overview: Permanent and Temporary Residents,” Citizenship and Immigration Canada, accessed April 28, 2011, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2009/permanent/10.asp>.

Once again, attempting to delineate Canadian identity proves to be problematic. Cherry seems to be well aware that his notion of a ‘good Canadian boy’ is fairly exclusive. At several points he refers to being cognisant of the possibility of offending people.⁴² What is at issue, though, is not the ‘P.C. Police’, but rather the fact that Cherry’s commentary is out of sync with contemporary Canada. He is harkening back to an over-romanticized portrait of Canada that never really existed.

Cherry’s use of the phrase “good Canadian boy” does not appear to be limited to his hockey commentary. During a March 27, 2010 tribute to Corporal Darren “Fitz” Fitzpatrick, Cherry refers to him as a “Prince George boy, BC boy.”⁴³ Similarly, in his tribute to a “beautiful guy” on his February 13, 2010 segment, Cherry notes that Corporal Joshua Baker was an “Edmonton boy.”⁴⁴ Again, for Cherry there is an inherent link between a good Canadian boy who plays hockey and a good Canadian boy who serves in the Canadian Armed Forces. This type of terminology links two sets of circumstances that would not normally be connected. While it should be noted that hockey teams have often paid tribute to the Canadian Forces through appreciation nights, these are one-time or annual events which pay tribute to and support local members of the military.⁴⁵ Cherry’s tributes, however serve to fuse hockey and support for the military on a more regular basis through the use of overlapping language.

Don Cherry’s use of language often equates hockey with war and hockey players with soldiers. He does this both in his explicit use of language, but also implicitly in the ways in which he refers to both hockey players and members of the Canadian Forces. On January 16, 2010, in the closing moments of his Coach’s Corner segment, Cherry paid tribute to Sergeant John Faught. Faught had been killed earlier in the week by an improvised explosive device while serving in Afghanistan. Immediately prior to paying tribute to this soldier, Cherry had been speaking about former Toronto Maple Leafs goaltender, Curtis Joseph and Joseph’s charitable causes. Cherry said that when it came to Curtis Joseph, you “can’t say enough for him. You’re a good guy; thumbs up.”⁴⁶ In many other contexts, this type of support for a retired hockey player would not present any issues for Canadian identity. However, as a way of a segue to his tribute to Faught, Cherry simply states “now, another good guy we’d like to put up here.”⁴⁷ He does so without any apparent need to differentiate between a good guy who plays hockey, and a good guy who serves in the Canadian Forces overseas. For Cherry, it would appear that it goes without saying that a Canadian soldier and a Canadian hockey player are – or

⁴² For example see *Coach’s Corner*, first broadcast 24 October 2009 and 10 May 2010.

⁴³ Don Cherry, *Coach’s Corner*, first broadcast 27 March 2010 by CBC.

⁴⁴ Don Cherry, *Coach’s Corner*, first broadcast 13 February 2010 by CBC.

⁴⁵ See, for example press releases from the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Ottawa Senators on the occasion of their Canadian Forces Appreciation Nights: “MLSE Honours Canadian Forces,” Toronto Maple Leafs – Press Releases, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://mapleleafs.nhl.com/club/news.htm?id=515284>. and “Bulletin: Senators present 7th annual Canadian Forces Appreciation Night,” The Ottawa Senators, accessed April 20, 2011, <http://senators.nhl.com/club/news.htm?id=541977>.

⁴⁶ Don Cherry, *Coach’s Corner*, first broadcast 16 January 2010 by CBC.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

ought to be – considered “good guys.” While this particular example could be considered as a one-off example of mixed use of phrases, he uses a similar method in referring to troops as “players.” When presenting his tributes to fallen soldiers, Cherry would occasionally quote letters or memories from the soldier’s fellow troops. In this case, Cherry accidentally refers to the soldiers as “players.” In then correcting himself, he further linked the terminology of hockey and the military by say “I call them players, well they are the players.”⁴⁸ In the same way, Cherry’s tribute to Corporal Darren Fitzpatrick noted that he was a “team guy.”⁴⁹

It was not that these soldiers were simply being described using colloquial references or sports analogies. Rather, there is a systematic attempt to apply the language of hockey to the military. In both of these examples, there is no apparent challenge for Cherry to refer to these two divergent careers with the use of the same terminology. What appears inherent in this case is the assumption that hockey players and soldiers are similar, if not analogous. For the purposes of this paper, it is noted that Cherry has taken two symbols of Canadian identity and fashioned them to illustrate his understanding of the Canadian identity.

Don Cherry’s brand of hockey is one that promotes a strong physical presence on the ice. This is no doubt reflected in his series of hockey videos and his frequent defences of fighting in hockey. As Table 1.1 notes, the words “fight”, “fights”, and “fighting” are used no fewer than 47 times during the 2009-2010 season. Cherry equates this physical style of play with being Canadian. During a post-season segment, Cherry notes that when an athlete displays a form of toughness in another sport, he is said to “play Canadian.”⁵⁰ He goes on to advise that “we have to keep that toughness, kids. We cannot pay attention to the media types, the stop fighting, stop fighting hitting and all that stuff. We’re the best and we’re the toughest.”⁵¹ For Cherry, however, this brand of “toughness” does not apply only to hockey players. In fact, it also applies to his view of the military and uses the same type of language. Cherry describes Canadian soldiers as:

They’re as tough as nails these guys and they never complain. You know the one thing they always say to me, you know what they say? “You know what really bothers us? What bothers us is certain politicians and people say that we’re the wrong guys. We capture the Taliban and everything and we turn them over to their people. And now we’re the bad guys. We’re the bad guys. And the message is that we want to put to these politicians and the people is: hey be more worried about us, the guys that do it than the guys than the Taliban that’s trying to blow us up.” And I say Amen to that.⁵²

⁴⁸ Don Cherry, *Coach’s Corner*, first broadcast 16 January 2010 by CBC.

⁴⁹ Don Cherry, *Coach’s Corner*, first broadcast 27 March 2010 by CBC.

⁵⁰ Don Cherry, *Coach’s Corner*, first broadcast 31 May 2010 by CBC.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Don Cherry, *Coach’s Corner*, first broadcast 9 June 2010 by CBC.

Not only do Cherry's comments reflect his support of a tough brand of "Canadianism" whether on ice or on the battlefield, it also reflects his unquestioning support of the military. While the issues and undertones surrounding the capture and detainment of Afghan prisoners have led to widespread commentary throughout the academic and popular presses, Cherry unflinchingly boils it down to a simple, yet nonetheless provocative defence of and support for the troops. For Cherry, it is not an issue of military agreements or third party observers; it is an issue of supporting the men and women of the Canadian Forces no matter what.

In his tribute to the 66th anniversary of the D-Day landing at Normandy, Cherry, much like George Grant 40 years earlier, highlights the valour of the allied forces on the battlefield. He closed his comments on D-Day by returning to the present day by stating "And I'll tell you something, folks. We were the best troops back then and we're the best troops in Afghanistan right now."⁵³ There can be no questioning Cherry's support for the Canadian Forces. However, a simple statement that the troops are "the best" begs the question of how Cherry arrived at that understanding. Was it based on a comprehensive review of the militaries of other western countries to determine that Canada's was more effective and efficient than the rest? Or rather, is it that Cherry's view of Canadian identity and nationalism is one that is predicated on a blind acceptance of patriotism and support for the military as a natural element of what it means to be a Canadian; especially a Canadian hockey fan.

Conclusion:

There can be no dispute that Don Cherry sees himself as a Canadian patriot. This paper has attempted to demonstrate how Cherry's use of language in his Coach's Corner segments reflects his understanding of Canadian nationalism. For Cherry, Canadian nationalism rests on an unquestioning support for the military, support of traditional institutions, and view of hockey that highlights the physical nature of the game.

While this paper has demonstrated that Don Cherry regularly has access to one of the largest viewing audiences on Canadian television, future research ought to focus on Cherry's influence among HNIC viewers. To that end, it is worth studying whether a viewer's impression of Cherry's views are determined by what they hear during his clips on HNIC or by any number of alternative mediums, including his charitable work, his role as an advertising spokesman, or his merchandising activities; namely his Rock'em Sock'em videos. The 2010 television movie, *Keep Your Head Up, Kid* could also provide a case study on how viewers see Don Cherry both as a hockey commentator and also as a public figure.

Don Cherry is a fixture in Canadian hockey culture. However, this paper has argued that Don Cherry has now carved out a specific understanding of Canadian identity. Like the philosopher George Grant before him, Cherry weekly issues his own lament for a hockey nation. Cherry's comments reflect a longing for a Canadian identity predicated on an unquestioning love

⁵³ Don Cherry, *Coach's Corner*, first broadcast 6 June 2010 by CBC.

of country and a support for the military. While this paper does not necessarily condemn Cherry's view of nationalism, it is noted that it is at odds with a multicultural Canadian identity. Don Cherry is known to bring his wrath down on those who disagree with his hockey commentary; this paper however has attempted to critique his commentary on Canadian identity. While Don Cherry is unlikely to rival George Grant for a spot on a second-year course syllabus, both have articulated a vision of Canadian identity that may conflict with other understandings of Canadian nationalism and identity, particularly as they relate to multiculturalism.

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