

 COMMENTARY

# Here's to the worker: this country was built with tools



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Here we are at that uniquely Canadian convergence of dual (duelling?) national holidays – triple, if one includes National Aboriginal Day on June 21. It's a time when, regardless of people's ancestry or when their ancestors arrived on these shores, or whether they were already ashore, Canadians celebrate what our forebears have built.

When people talk about nation-building, it usually refers to the struggle to establish the political institutions that are at the foundation of a “dominion” based on democratic principles of government and the sanctity of civil and human rights.

That particular type of nation-building was mostly the work of politicians, and since no one is actually born a politician, the builders taking on the task of cobbling together the country were almost all lawyers, journalists, doctors or businessmen.

Of the 36 men (no women yet, alas) identified as the Fathers of Confederation, only two had a job that may have required them to occasionally pick up a tool or get their trousers dirty.

George Coles, who would become the first premier of Prince Edward Island, was a farmer but was better known

for owning a brewery. William Pearce Howland, a Quaker immigrant from the United States, ran a sawmill and general store near Toronto before plunging into politics.

Needless to say, there was not one carpenter or mason among the lot of political nation-builders. Chances are, though, times being what they were back in pioneering days, most of Canada's founders would have had at least a passing familiarity with tools in their youth.

It was people wielding tools who actually built the dwellings, factories, commercial buildings, barns, railway stations and houses of worship, government or entertainment that caused a modern nation to rise from the wilderness.

The French lyrics of Canada's national anthem say the country's “arm knows how to carry a sword and a cross,”

but what about a hammer, rip saw, shovel or chisel? The soldiers and the priests have had their role, but praise be to the worker bees.

Not to go overboard on the hammer and sickle thing – sure, it was the people with *das Kapital* who financed the building of the country – but folks with manual skills and know-how did the grunt work to execute the entrepreneurial vision.

We're at a point in the evolution of the country where we are at least a generation or two distant from the era when people commonly built their own homes. Fading photographs tell the story of our ancestors eking out the semblance of a civilized life in a house built of rough-hewn wood, with a few pieces of handmade furniture.

Hence, we have in this country a rather perverse

crisis in the sense that there is a dire shortage of skilled trades workers. Companies are desperate for auto mechanics, construction workers, metalworkers, electricians, heavy machine operators – basically people who do all the stuff that your average middle-aged weekend DIY guy or gal fantasizes about.

Why this crying need exists might be attributed to a failure of the vocational training system, or maybe that these rough and sometimes gritty jobs, though generally very well paid, just don't appeal to young people not willing to risk putting a greasy finger on the screens of their electronic devices.

Is it possible Canadians in general are over-educated and find blue-collar jobs beneath them? According to 2016 stats from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD), Canada has the highest level of college and university education among its 35 member countries. More than half of Canadians aged 25-64 have post-secondary qualifications.

More than 22 per cent of the population have a college diploma, though Quebec's CEGEP system probably skews those numbers. The average among other OECD countries is eight per cent. Less than eight per cent of Canadian men in the 25-34 age group have an apprenticeship certificate in some skilled trade; for women, that number is even lower.

As home handymen and handywomen channel their ancestors while building that new deck, new kitchen floor or finished basement, perhaps they should take a moment to ponder who will pick up the tools to build the Canada of tomorrow.

## Jean Robert named as chair of the National Battlefields Commission

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On June 15, Minister of Canadian Heritage Mélanie Joly announced the appointment of former CEGEP Champlain–St. Lawrence campus director Jean Robert as the new chair of the National Battlefields Commission, for a term of five years. “With his experience and expertise, Mr. Robert will protect the historic legacy of this important national park, so that Canadians can learn about a significant chapter in Canadian history,” said Joly in a press release.

Robert is currently the senior advisor for McGill University's Institute for Health and Social Policy Training and Retention of Health Professionals. He also served as campus director

and assistant director for the dean of academic services and student affairs for CEGEP Champlain–St. Lawrence.

Robert is an active member of his community and serves on a number of boards, including as a member of the provincial committee on English-language education, as chair of the Jeffery Hale Foundation and as chairman of the executive committee of the Central Québec School Board.

Robert said the appointment was a surprise. “I got a call about a year ago from a friend asking if I would consider applying, and hadn't had any news,” he recalled. “Then, a couple of months ago, I got a call asking if I would go to Ottawa for an interview and had to give six references. I knew I was in

the running.

“Last Thursday, I got a call from the Privy Council and then a call from Mélanie Joly's office. I officially started on June 15, when I had my first board meeting and met with the general director, Michelle Gagné, and all the senior staff in charge of the respective departments. At its peak, there are about 140 people working on the Plains, so there are a lot of things going on. I feel really fortunate to have been chosen; it is really special being from Quebec City and receiving [this] appointment. The Plains continue to be a beautiful place, and people work really hard at maintaining the balance between its [role as] a historical site and as a place where people can go for concerts and entertainment.

“That is probably one of the main challenges, as everyone wants to go on the Plains,” Robert says. “I think they have close to 235 events per year. The Festival d'Été attracts hundreds of thousands of people, but all the other events, like the Edwin-Bélanger Bandstand [concerts], have attracted 600,000 people over the past 20-something years.

“I have a feeling one of the reasons I got the appointment was because I really believe there is something we can do with education. We have so many educational institutions in Quebec City; maybe there is something we can do to work with the universities, CEGEPs, high schools and so on. There are a lot of nice projects. I met the head gardener and will spend time with him this week. It's phenomenal the number of plants and trees we take care of every year.

“Many friends have told me I have pretty well failed retirement [since leaving St. Lawrence College in 2014],

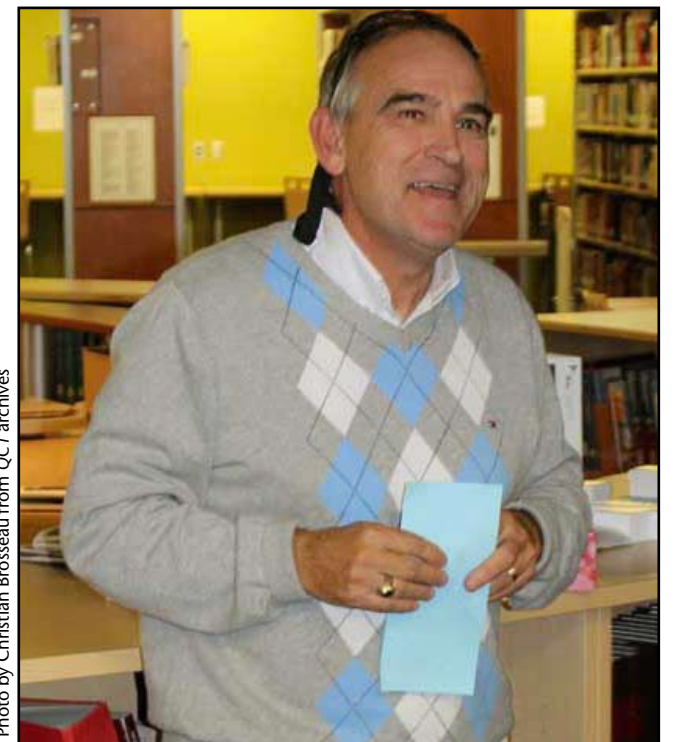


Photo by Christian Brosseau from QCT archives

Jean Robert, shown here during his retirement party from St. Lawrence College in 2014, has recently been named the chair of the National Battlefields Commission.

but I really see this as a way to give back to a city that has been so good to me and my family.

“I am replacing Margaret Delisle, who has done a phenomenal job. [She] ... set

the tone and really fought for what she believed was best for the Plains, to preserve its beauty and historical value. If I can continue that kind of work, it'll go really well.”

**BANDSTAND**

# Edwin-Bélanger

FREE  
8 p.m.

**PLAINS OF ABRAHAM**

<p><b>JUNE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10 Bandstand by Invitation (Renee Wilkin, Catherine Durand, Fredy V)</li> <li>14 Le jazz de mon pays: tribute to Harmonium by Jean-François Lambert</li> <li>15 The Fat Cats</li> <li>16 In Trance: tribute to Scorpions</li> <li>17 Renee Wilkin</li> <li>21 Gill &amp; Gang Goes Country</li> <li>22 Catherine Durand</li> <li>28 Mehdi Cayenne</li> <li>29 Daran</li> <li>30 Fredy V</li> </ul>	<p><b>JULY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>19 JW Jones</li> <li>20 Angel Forrest</li> <li>21 Carine au Micro</li> <li>22 Les Bouches Béés</li> <li>26 Bandstand by Invitation (Jérôme Couture, Annie Blanchard, Dramatik)</li> <li>27 Tribute (to come)</li> <li>28 Marie-Elaine Thibert</li> <li>29 Pulse Fiction: tribute to Pink Floyd</li> </ul>
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**AUGUST**

02 Annie Blanchard	04 Dramatik
03 Misses Satchmo	05 Jérôme Couture

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## Peonies soon in bloom

Peonies soon will be blooming in the Parc du Bois-de-Coulonge. Next fine day, be sure to go for a walk there to check them out.



Photo by Shirley Nadeau