

random heads of state

The function of a head of state is different from that of an executive leader such as an American president. A head of state provides continuity during times of electoral or constitutional crisis, and represents the feelings of the country during disasters and celebrations. She does this without angling for personal political gain. In a parliamentary system the head of state is the president or monarch, while the executive leader is the prime minister. In Canada it is the governor general (we need a better name.) (There are many versions of the idea. Some understand the unity of the country as religious. In Iran for example the supreme leader does have political power, but the underlying doctrine of Vilayat-e Faqih still aims, I think, to have a symbol of legitimacy that is distinct from the political process.) When the head of state is appointed by political leaders or is elected, there is a danger that she may come from the political class, and that the election may be a contest between parties. On the other hand, constitutional monarchies have their own problems. The person is often not good at the job, and a royal upbringing makes it likely that they will not be. (The Anglo-Saxons chose their kings by vote, from members of the royal family. That at any rate weeds out the idiots and the tactless.) In the United States, guidance during constitutional crises is provided by the supreme court: there is a case for choosing justices in part for their suitability as symbols of the nation, so that they could represent a communal sense after hurricanes and bereavements, and present trophies to winning teams. The two Obama appointees, Sotomayor and Kagan, seem to me plausible in this role. (Pushing it, just imagine the supreme court giving out academy awards. The mind boggles. Might be good for both the justices and the actors.)

This note suggests a way of choosing heads of state, supposing the functions are as I have described them. I have Canada in mind, but it is supposed to be general. It is compatible with the Canadian connection with the British monarchy, though it obviously could be developed as an idea for doing without royalty.

The idea has randomness at heart. There is a large element of chance in the process, and common knowledge of this makes the symbolical person both special — fate has chosen them — and ordinary — fate could have chosen anyone. But there are practical details. We start with a "royal pool". It is a group of perhaps a thousand people, unpaid, selected by nominations that have to be signed by five hundred others, and who have made it clear that they understand what the job entails and that it cannot advance their business or their career. (People who are or have been members of government — MPs, senators, and so on, perhaps military officers — cannot be nominated. They are admitted as vacancies arise, in a way that makes the pool always have at least as many women as men, have thirty percent francophones, and ten percent first nations. These categories can overlap. All members of the pool are between the ages of fifty and seventy. Then from the pool a "royal college" of twenty people is chosen, at random, one by one

as vacancies arise. The randomness is strict: each member of the pool has a one in a thousand chance of being selected. Members of the royal college officiate at public occasions, give prizes, console the grieving, and represent the country at some occasions abroad. Their expenses are paid but they do not earn significant amounts. The general public notes how well individual members of the college have done: whether they produced good public emotions, whether they were dignified without being stiff, whether they had clever ways around small dilemmas, whether the spotlight affected their character. Tests of good judgement in the wide sense. The media comment on this. Every year we choose by election which two members of the college to drop. (The whole country could vote, with a voting system that ensured that a person dropped was not the favourite of a large number of voters. But a more local system might have advantages. Two exclusions would be made by francophone women and first nations men, the next two by anglophone men and women in the maritimes, and so on, rotating through suitable categories.) And every six years a new head of state is chosen, again at random, from members of the royal college who have been serving for the previous six years.

The scheme is simple: selection at random into the college, thinning of the college in accordance with public perception of suitability, then random selection of the head of state.

The result would be a head of state who was no politician, but who had been selected for public skills, and whose selection was our way of saying that we run the country together. A Governor-General of Canada could be selected this way and the usual pro-forma request made to the Queen. Kings and Queens could also be selected in this way, of course. America could do it too, whether or not the president was re-named the prime minister. Egalitarian but not political.