

The Tale of the CNS Logo

by Jeremy Whitlock

A scientist is always questioning. Weary of too many questions one day, I pushed back from my computer, cuddled my cold coffee, and let my gaze wander around the office. Of course, the questions flooded in: “Why can’t I get better shelving than this?” “How much does it cost to print that glossy internal newsletter?” “Is that a bullet hole?”

Then my eyes beheld my brand new CNS Membership Certificate hanging on the wall, and suddenly, an age old nagging question loomed before me: “What on earth is that CNS logo supposed to be anyway?” Don’t get me wrong – I’ve always liked the CNS logo: that sharp-looking atom thingy with its blue elliptical orbit canted to the right, offset by a bold red maple leaf. It says, “I am Canadian. And I am nuclear.” It is rarely spared a second thought, and yet is known to all – the essence of good corporate art.

But wait. What exactly IS it trying to say? Surely that atom thingy is more than just a ... thingy.

It’s not the only question I’ve had about the logo design. I used to wonder why its creators put space between the maple leaf and the ellipse, making life tough for the lapel pin designers. In more contemplative moments, I’ve marveled at how the logo makes for an inherently unstable lapel pin, with the maple leaf in its highest energy state, gravitationally speaking. How many of us have strutted around conference receptions sporting a tiny upside-down maple leaf, like some microscopic distress signal?

However, this isn’t to impugn the foresight of the logo’s creators. Originality, impression, recognition-factor, identity, patriotism – these were the criteria by which our symbol was forged, and no doubt under a deadline. Equally so, the artists of the late 70’s cannot be faulted for building into the design an inherent sensitivity to digital reproduction. The CNS logo, with its pixel-width lines of graded thickness, slanted well away from the vertical, has become an unwitting standard by which the resolution of laser printers and computer monitors can be benchmarked. In the digital-only world of the new CNS website, for instance, we can look quite tattered at the receiving end, and it’s beyond our control.

But that’s splitting hairs. I have the utmost respect for the ANS, our counterpart to the South, but I’ll take our elegant emblem any day over the uninspired, post-war industrialism of their trademark. Sure, you can stamp the American logo into mashed potatoes and it would remain legible. Sure, it’s a one-piece, symmetric design unhindered by gravitational caprice. Sure, the organization’s acronym festoons the image like the “USA” on a Saturn V rocket. The fact is, our CNS logo is distinct, and distinctly Canadian.

Take that maple leaf, for example. As unmistakable as the maple leaf they slip around the GM logo, to make GM Canada. Or the maple leaves that Americans paste onto their luggage when they wish to be treated courteously abroad.

It's understated, but bold. Small, but effective. Well intentioned, but sometimes it hangs upside down.

Most importantly, our logo, like our CANDU reactor, is based on science, not expediency. The focus, after all, is a representation of atomic structure. I don't mean the generic whirligig atom found everywhere else, including the ANS logo – but a specific, albeit figurative, atom.

This brings me back to my original query. What exactly is the atomic species staring back at me from that Membership Certificate, or from the front cover of the Bulletin, or (inverted) from my left lapel? Clearly, three particles lie within the listing ellipse, of which two appear identical. I mentally draw up a short list consisting of: a tritium atom, a positive He-3 ion (which would explain the lapel pin's unstable energy state), and a water molecule with a highly figurative electron orbit. Perhaps the latter is heavy water – but deadline or no deadline, I really think they would have bent the polar molecule, wouldn't they?

Convinced that, by enshrining tritium as our trademark, the logo's creators had perpetrated the greatest tongue-in-cheek prank of our time, I sought out Mr. George Howey, the CNS' founding president from almost twenty years ago. This wasn't hard, since he's my next-door neighbour, but as it happens I cornered him at a CNS seminar. George, retired from managing Ontario Hydro's technical training program, instantly recognized the nobility of my quest, and pointed the finger at Dan Meneley, the CNS' founding Secretary/Treasurer. Confronting Dan was more difficult since he's currently one of AECL's main men in the Far East (Asia, not Point Lepreau). However, through the magic of internet, Dan responded shortly from the Red River Valley of Vietnam, and pointed the finger soundly (if virtually) at R. Allan Brown, currently of R.A. Brown & Associates Ltd. in Toronto. Allan in turn pointed right back at Dan.

A flurry of emails ensued, but the combatants generally behaved like gentlemen, and in the end a semi-coherent picture emerged. It seems that twenty years ago, the nascent Canadian Nuclear Society, formed as an offshoot of the CNA, needed its own identity. The call to create a logo was answered by Dan Meneley, who drew two nucleons within an electron orbit, and declared it D-2, heavy hydrogen. Simple, logical, and based on the science behind the product.

Shortly thereafter, Allan Brown and the late John Hewitt (the CNS' first Vice President) met over lunch at the U of T's Hart House to finalize the design. The maple leaf was added, along with that third "circle", which, logically enough, is the "electron". Close inspection reveals that the ellipse does indeed intersect the "electron". A satisfying answer indeed, regardless of the fact that electrons are not the same size as nucleons, nor are they likely to be lined up in space so neatly with the nucleons.

At some point the top-secret concept made its way to George Howey, who sized it up through a cloud of cigar smoke, declared it acceptable, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The original colour scheme, it also emerged, was a baby blue atom and a red maple leaf. Over the years the atom's colour has not only changed (sometimes dark blue, sometimes red nucleons/blue orbit), but the incline of the ellipse seems to have varied as well. The consensus

points to the current CNS letterhead as the closest to the original vision. Oddly, this slipshod QA is also satisfyingly consistent – where else but in Canada would we mismanage a symbol over such a short period of time?

So there you have it. Leaving no rock unturned, no corner of the Earth untouched, I've marched steadfastly through the mists of time to seek my answer: D-2. Hopefully the facts are close to what I report here; possibly they suffer from twenty years' moss-growth. Regardless, I can now return my cold coffee to its rightful place (the mouse pad), push back to my computer, and seek other unearthly riddles more closely related to what they pay me for.

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