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One step forward after a shove or two back

By Brock Weir

It is staggering to think just how much things have changed over the last 20-or-so months.

Our physical worlds became smaller as we were asked to stay at or close to home. Our workplaces have changed drastically. Our social networks ? that is, networks of face-to-face contacts, not the virtual realm of how ?social network? is defined today ? have undoubtedly taken a hit. Our outlets to decompress ? intellectually, creatively, and otherwise ? have been limited and, in general, the rhythms of our day-to-day lives have been significantly disrupted.

Despite a recent pause in the Province's plan to get us back to a maskless new normal due to rising cases of COVID-19, we are gradually rediscovering these outlets, getting a jolt of what we had been missing, and are seeing how these paused outlets fit in with the new outlets we now hold dear, ones which were born out of necessity during the global pandemic.

We have been catching up with friends and family again, some of whom have been just out of reach since March of 2020. We are relearning the ways of working in the office. And, whether we are inching out or bursting forth in heading to the border ? any border ? at the first sight of a green light, our worlds are expanding once again.

As much as the world around us has changed, and as much as it hasn't, the global pandemic has, in many ways, changed our perspectives.

As our worlds closed in, many of us took the time to explore our immediate neighbourhoods and maybe, for the very first time, engage with neighbours from a safe distance.

We discovered, perhaps to our surprise, what we now define as ?frontline workers? go through every day, not just in the face of invisible danger.

We took stock on the very individuals who are essential in keeping us safe every day of our lives, from doctors, to nurses, to first responders, to hospital staff of every job description and level of visibility, and did whatever we could to honour their service and fight for what they deserve.

But I feel many of us already knew the importance of engaging with our communities. We already knew what the non-medical frontline workers go through every day, regardless of a pandemic, simply from being on the other side of the desk or counter. We already knew the Herculean efforts our hospital workers, first responders, and hospital staff put in every day.

The pandemic has simply opened our eyes to some realities we either did not have time to consider as were too busy or absorbed in ourselves, or, in some cases, opened our eyes to realities we preferred not to see.

Earlier this month, the Provincial Government announced they were increasing the minimum wage across Ontario to $15 starting in January of 2022.

It was very welcome news for employees across the board ? but the Province is hardly reinventing the wheel with this. Upon taking power after the 2018 election, one of the first acts of the newly-elected Progressive Conservatives was to cancel a plan by the outgoing Liberals to raise the minimum wage by the exact same standard.

Upon doing so, they were lauded in many quarters, including some business leaders and advocates, for doing right by them.

If a week is a long time in politics, three years is practically a generation and here we are, mere months before Ontarians are due to

head back to the polls, back where we started, with a boost for employees coming fast and quick.

?Ontario's workers have been the unsung heroes of this pandemic, as they've stocked shelves, kept our supply chain moving and helped so many of us enjoy a meal among family and friends at a local restaurant,? said Premier Doug Ford in a statement. ?When we asked labour leaders what their priorities were, increasing the minimum wage was at the top of the list. As the cost of living continues to go up, our government is proud to be working for workers, putting money into their pockets by increasing the minimum wage.?

Following the release of the Fall Economic Statement, Deputy Premier Christine Elliott told me: ?We believe it is the right time to bring it forward now because people are finding the cost of everything now ? from food to utilities ? everything is becoming more expensive and we want to make sure people can stay in their own community and find jobs. Many employers have already increased their wages to their staff so we don't expect this is going to provide a significant issue for employers.?

Well, good on employers for recognizing this need a good long while ago, but the rising cost of living is nothing new. While the Ford government is right to recognize the work being carried out by our unsung heroes, it is not always just work that has come about as a result of the pandemic; in many cases this is work that has been carried out day in and day out by these unsung heroes who, after clocking out at the end of the day, clock into a second gig just to be able to feed their families. They may have started the day stocking shelves to keep our supply chain going and finished by helping others enjoy a meal at a restaurant before being able to kick their shoes off at night. And this is certainly not new information from labour leaders who have been all too willing to share this reality with the Province, regardless of which party is steering the ship.

But, although many are still hoping for a living wage to become the norm, Ontario is ready to take a step forward after being shoved back a pace or two. If it took a pandemic to open up the eyes of some to an uncomfortable, non-partisan truth, that is one silver lining worth clinging to.

An election in the offing never hurts, either.