

Addressing a pandemic by committee

By **BROCK WEIR**

Coming home from work last Tuesday, I felt a little more cantankerous than usual after a long day.

I couldn't put my finger on just what made it more difficult to digest. There was a heavy workload to be sure, but not extraordinarily so. Given the volume, how things proceeded couldn't have gone smoother; there were fewer last-minute changes to be made and the evening meeting I had to cover in tandem was mercifully brief.

So, what was the X factor that made me feel I had been kicked in the proverbial butt without any bruises to show for it?

It took about 30 minutes of decompression to suss out the root cause: the walls felt like they were closing in.

I jest when I say I came home from work. Actually, coming home from work is a pretty short trip, as I suspect it is for most of us these days. Doing so around here consists of opening a door and descending the set of 15 stairs to the living room, just far enough away from the computers and devices but, in many respects, not nearly far enough.

Part of that decompression was venting to anyone who cared to listen. The subtle joy of going to and from the office, a concept which would have felt decidedly alien 15 arduous months ago, is something I've subconsciously been pining for. Or, maybe it was just longing for a change of scenery. Whatever it is, the upstairs room wasn't cutting it and I felt the need to bust out.

How quickly things change. By the time Friday came around, I couldn't have had more gratitude for the window and four walls that have allowed business to remain as 'usual' as possible during these very challenging times because they're my own, more or less. I'm working from the comfort of home, and I have the luxury of staying home until that light at the end of the tunnel so many of our elected officials keep talking about breaks into clear blue sky.

What caused this turnaround?

It might have a little something to do with our healthcare system here in Ontario which, if you take the word of medical experts and the doctors and nurses who have walked the walk and talked the talk for the last 400 days or so, is now essentially on the verge of collapse under mounting cases of COVID-19.

Those same people who have walked the walk and talked the talk were once the individuals that people rallied behind at the start of this pandemic. The people we applauded at the end of their shifts each evening. The people for whom we emblazoned our lawns and windows with signs, decorations and other shows of solidarity. The people who were the subject of grassroots movements to provide hot lunches and dinners while they worked tirelessly to save the lives of our loved ones.

The same people whose cries for help, and help in a way that is far from earth-shattering, seem to be falling on the deaf ears of the decision-makers who can ultimately make a difference.

Their cries have rarely shifted a note. Their message has been fairly simple. Providing paid sick leave for essential workers across Ontario in a global pandemic just might provide people living from paycheque to paycheque the means to stay home, stay isolated and keep themselves, their families and coworkers safe when they display the signs and symptoms we now know all too well.

Rather than heeding this advice 'no, I'm sticking with that 'cry for help'? the Premier has said floating the very concept is playing politics and has forged ahead with his floundering approach to tackling a horrendous third wave that is now here. A horrendous third wave that we knew was coming. A horrendous third wave that we knew was coming because those same medical experts told us so and had the data to back it up.

Now, here we are, the health care system teetering and our leaders ending the week by rebuffing offers of help. Awaiting a response to a request for more 'hands on deck' from the healthcare systems of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Quebec, the Ontario government Friday turned down other 'hands' ready and able to get in the trenches of this seemingly never-ending fight to make a political point?

'While we appreciate the Prime Minister's offer [for members of the Red Cross to aid in Ontario's vaccine rollout], unless it is matched with an increase in supply, we do not need the Red Cross at this time for administration of vaccines in Ontario,' said the Premier's office in a statement. 'We do not have a capacity issue, we have a supply issue.'

There's no doubt there's a supply issue, but more 'hands on deck' to distribute the vaccines we have now could free up our public health nurses and others whose skills might be more useful in hospitals while the burden of administering the vaccine rollout (such as it is) can be lifted off the buckling healthcare system we depend on.

Yet we're now staring disaster in the face and our essential workers having to trudge into work day in and day out knowing that just one symptom could make or break their family, leaving them with no choice but to keep calm, carry on, and unable to do their part to flatten the curve if it means being unable to put food on their tables or, at worst, unable to keep their homes.

'As the latest modelling confirms, without taking immediate and decisive action, COVID-19 cases will spiral out of control and our hospitals will be overwhelmed,' said the Premier on Friday. 'That's why we are making difficult, but necessary decisions to reduce mobility and keep people in the safety of their own homes.'

Unfortunately, those measures to reduce mobility and keep people in the safety of their own homes only went as far as revised capacity limits for retail and, until negative blowback over the weekend from all corners of Ontario, new powers handed to the police to come down on Ontarians like a pack of 800 pound gorillas going for a walk in their neighbourhoods without carrying proof of address, from speaking with their neighbours from a safe distance on their front lawns, or, after cleaning up after a day of work in a factory or warehouse with a few hundred coworkers left standing, taking their son or daughter out for a quick swing at the local park.

It seems this far more aggressive third wave is being fought by throwing a raft of possible solutions of various efficacy at the wall and, first, seeing what sticks, second, seeing what will test Ontarians to the limit with their dismay and frustration and, third, walking things back when those lines have been crossed.

If that continues to be the case, all one can keep saying is God bless the people of Ontario.