

Back on the trail

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

It wasn't all that long ago when I was standing on a makeshift wooden box, left teetering on one foot, such was the room left on top of it as more and more people joined me.

There was electricity in the air to be sure, but many of us would have preferred to be elsewhere as we waited for a Federal leader to show up to this converted plaza unit.

The media were left with this one little island amid the teeming sea of humanity below as we waited for the man of the hour(s): a party leader making a sweep of the area during a heated election campaign.

Those of us who had cameras, notebooks and other tools of the trade in hand, were kept our places on the wooden box which, which was almost miraculously not buckling under the collective weight of eight to ten others.

We weren't looking to be elsewhere because of campaign fatigue or any personal opinion of the leader we were waiting for. Rather, it was Thanksgiving Sunday and, if my situation was reflective of the others, family dinner was getting cold in Etobicoke.

Delayed by nearly 90 minutes and counting after said leader was mobbed in a community just to the north, the family had started regularly checking in, but certainly not by phone. The energized din in the room wouldn't allow that. Texts were the order of the day, responses to which were particularly perilous when you're in a situation where the merest brush of an elbow ran the risk of sparking a crowd surfing situation.

But, the leader eventually arrived, did what leaders are expected to do, revved up the crowd with their talking points, shook too many hands to count, posed for more selfies in a few minutes than most of us have since the advent of that social media art form, and hopped back on the bus once again ? probably to some turkey takeout on board as the rest of us raced to waiting dinner tables.

Although that campaign was just about two months ago, it seems like a world away. And, in many respects, it was; but here we are, once again in election mode, one which promises to be unlike any other.

We all know the world has changed significantly since Justin Trudeau's majority government was swept away by the electorate in favour of a minority. As such, we have been living under the threat or promise (depending on your viewpoint) of a snap election for, well, let's be generous and say the last 21 months.

In that time, there has been no shortage of sabre rattling.

The Conservative opposition changed leaders from Andrew Scheer to Erin O'Toole after a hotly contested race. The Greens followed suit, replacing long-time leader Elizabeth May with Annamie Paul.

The cast was in place for any eventuality and then?crickets. That is not to say that there was necessarily silence; on the contrary, it seemed that just about every third vote that came up in the House of Commons over the last year or so was transformed into a confidence matter with the Prime Minister daring any of the other parties to blink.

Those crickets? Maybe it's more accurate to liken it to the sound of air spluttering out of the nozzle-end of a balloon as it all came to naught.

Whether it was a matter of strategy, COVID-19, or simply the lengthy hunt to find a new Governor General following the resignation of Julie Payette, it was ultimately left to the Prime Minister to stroll up to Rideau Hall on Sunday and ask for the dissolution of Parliament. No confidence vote required.

Many of us have dreaded it since the spring of 2020, but here it is: a Federal election in the middle of a global pandemic.

Had the election been called a couple of months ago, some of what we would have seen in the lead-up to election day itself would have been more or less 'business as usual' but now our candidates and their supporters are once again pounding the pavement while they and us are staring down the barrel of a fourth wave.

In the two days since Governor General Mary Simon dropped the writ, the campaigns themselves appear to be a mix of the old and new, with Trudeau making more traditional campaign stops and meeting supporters mask to mask, while O'Toole spent Days 1 and 2 meeting virtually with thousands of supporters across the country.

If the number of daily new cases of COVID-19 continues on its upward trajectory, as medical experts feel it will, candidates vying to be our next Members of Parliament and Prime Minister will need to have multiple paths on the table in order to connect with voters.

O'Toole has taken this approach right out of the gate, something which may hold him in good stead should our public health crisis turn upside down.

Regardless of the uncertainty ahead of us, however, connecting with voters is what they will have to do and it is incumbent on voters to connect with the individuals hoping to represent their interests in Ottawa as well.

Thankfully, in our highly connected and potentially contagious world, it is no longer necessary to head out to an all-candidates meeting in order to engage with the names destined to be on our ballots. Nor is it necessary to open the door to whichever smiling face might be on the other side.

But as much as it is necessary for candidates to get their views and platform planks to the electorate it is necessary as well for voters to make an informed decision and pick the candidate that will best represent their interests in Ottawa and the Party they feel best reflects their worldview. (And if these two factors align, that decision is made so much easier)

Over the next few weeks, I hope you will pay attention, stay engaged, and make an informed decision for the future of this country, whatever the future might ultimately hold.

As for covering the campaign for this newspaper, given public health restrictions, I don't see balancing on one foot on top of a box with eight to ten of my closest colleagues in the middle of 300 people standing shoulder to shoulder in my particular deck of cards.

And I'll count that as a personal win.