

Back to Business Unusual

by BROCK WEIR

Everybody needs a little bit of time away.

At least that's the view of the band Chicago in their 1982 hit "Hard to Say I'm Sorry."

Everybody does need a little bit of time away - that's not in dispute - but, if you're like me, the hardest part of getting a little bit of time away is anticipating what you might be coming back to.

When we're young, the trepidation of returning to school is tempered somewhat by the idea of being able to catch up with friends you weren't able to over the summer, reconnecting and hearing about what they did.

Things change when you get older and you're in the workplace.

While many are able to fully clock out when their time for a bit of a getaway rolls around, some aren't, for whatever reason, fully able to "turn off" what they're ordinarily tuned into.

I've had a bit of enforced time away recently due to long-awaited hip surgery.

While I've been able to work remotely for the last couple of weeks, the first few days after the surgery at the start of the month was a bit iffy in terms of what I was able to accomplish. I'm thankful for our teams for pitching in during my absence, and I know the papers were in very capable hands, yet there were still those inescapable questions in the back of my mind: What have I missed? What am I coming back to?

I wonder if our politicians ever feel the same way?

The halls of Queen's Park were bustling again at the start of this week as Members of Provincial Parliament returned to the job after more than 100 days away from the Legislature.

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not begrudging these MPPs time off.

In fact, it's not really time off at all. While the duration of their time away from the halls of government is the subject for another day, and, trust me, people have plenty of opinions about how much time off elected representatives "deserve," the reality is this "time off" is more often than not focused on constituency work - that is, meeting with the people they represent, checking in on worthy organizations within the community, regardless of whether the groups in question have received Provincial or Federal dollars, and, essentially, bringing that important public face to many important elements of our civic life.

During this busy "time away," however, I hope they were able to get some rest and find opportunities to stay in shape because, regardless of what political party they represent, they've had to really hit the ground running.

Premier Ford has left little guesswork as to what the current sitting of the legislature will have to tackle, debate and pass - or not - this legislative season and, from my vantage point, it seems it might be some time before we clear the distractions and get back to substantive business for the people of Ontario.

One announcement ahead of the Legislature resuming that got a deservedly positive reception from members of the public was a series of amendments proposed to make it illegal for concert, sport, and event tickets being resold for more than their official cost. Of course, enforcement will be key to the success of any changes, but it's change for the better and long-overdue.

Another positive step is the proposed creation of a Province-wide Primary Care Medical Record System, which will help make things smoother for just about every player in our beleaguered healthcare system.

Another potential positive, although I'm a bit more skeptical on how effective it will ultimately be, is opening up HOV lanes (High Occupancy Vehicles) on highways during non-peak hours. Those lanes are underused, yes, and opening them up in the off-time could certainly help ease congestion on those applicable highways, but it does nothing to encourage carpooling or support transit, which are essential for tackling the root issues of gridlock. A band-aid like this could help, but band-aids are only temporary.

Then there's the proposal to allow 'Bring Your Own' booze to outdoor public events across the Province. Now, this is an issue that caught me off-guard as I haven't once heard this identified as an issue for Ontarians in the most recent or any of the myriad Provincial campaigns I've covered. But, then again, neither was allowing booze sales in gas stations or corner stores.

'Starting this spring, Ontario is giving communities more flexibility to safely and responsibly enjoy cultural and outdoor events,' said Ontario Attorney General Doug Downey in a statement. 'The 'Bring-Your-Own' event permits will help save attendees more money, lower overhead costs for event organizers, and contribute to local economies.'

Sure, it just might do that, and while municipalities will have to pass appropriate bylaws to regulate the consumption of alcohol in public before this is a model that can come to our communities, it could, to my mind, stretch already-resource-strapped municipalities even further ' the security issues alone could be eye-watering ' but also place towns and cities in the awkward position of declining to move forward with this, and leaving them to deal with the blow-back from residents looking forward to lifting a few of their own cold ones with friends during, say, Canada Day celebrations in the local park.

Then there's the question of the financial hit a move in this direction would cause many of our service clubs who partner with communities to offer beer gardens, for example, at municipal events, a win for municipalities who don't want to take on the responsibility of doing it themselves, a win for the service clubs who make money to invest back into the community, and a win for all those looking to wet their respective whistles.

Then there's the Premier's calls on the Federal government to legalize the use of pepper spray in self-defence, billing it as a 'common sense way to help people, especially women in vulnerable situations,' and to livestream bail hearings.

I don't know about the rest of you, and while I champion everything women can do to protect themselves in vulnerable situations, the idea of just about everyone having the ability to carry this around on their person, doesn't necessarily fill me with a feeling of safety and security. In the heated environment we find ourselves living in, it's not beyond the realm of possibility that it could be deployed in the most minor of cases, and even to 'settle' differences of opinion.

And as for livestreaming bail hearings, we only need to look as far as the frequent judicial circuses that happen south of our border to see that it's not the best idea.

Does bail reform need to take place? Absolutely. Is live-streaming bail hearings the right solution? If only Jay Leno can connect us with the surviving Dancing Itos for their insights.

Everybody needs a little bit of time away, so I hope our elected representatives rested up for what's certainly sounding like a wild ride.

Buckle-up for it, sure, but wait to see what shakes down before hitting the HOV lanes for a solo cruise.