

Bill Rea ? Town Hall meetings help

There is a lot I don't like about the government of Premier Kathleen Wynne, but I have to give her full marks for courage.

I spent last Wednesday evening in a hall in Brampton, watching as she hosted a Town Hall meeting.

The crowd wasn't bad. I would estimate there were about 300 in the room, although there were a few empty seats. Granted, the weather was a little threatening.

At the risk of sounding like a name-dropper, I have known Wynne for some time. She first ran for a school trustee seat in the North Toronto Ward where I was one of the local editors in 1994. A couple of years later, when then premier Mike Harris decided to amalgamate the various municipalities in Metro Toronto into one megacity (without consulting the electorate, who are supposed to have some say in such matters), Wynne and former Toronto mayor John Sewell helped found a grassroots group called Citizens for Local Democracy (C4LD). I attended weekly meetings which she chaired, joining a lot of other people, drumming up support for the impromptu referendum that Harris refused to hold.

I well remember Referendum night, 20 years ago March 3. Wynne was prominent on the stage of the Massey Hall, one of the locations where her side held victory rallies after the referendum polls closed. She was scrawling results on a flip chart while I ran up and down the very steep stairs of Massey Hall (I was a lot younger then) interviewing people and seeking camera angles.

Wynne and I were on the same page in those days. But as I noted already, that was 20 years ago.

I will always believe that Kathleen Wynne is a very nice, smart, personable individual. It's the way she governs that I have a problem with.

So do a lot of other people, which is why I really have to respect her for standing up to the crowd at the recent Town Hall. And she made it plain there was nothing that was off limits. One man even questioned her about her lawsuit against Progressive Conservative Leader Patrick Brown (he was not complimentary in the way he phrased the question, but if Wynne was fazed, she sure didn't show it).

One also has to give credit to the crowd. The meeting was openly advertised, meaning anyone could have walked in. We even promoted it in the Citizen. There was every possibility that things could have become ugly, but they did not. There were a few people asking questions who made it clear they are not planning to vote Liberal in a couple of months. There were a couple of people who were more interested in making statements than getting the Premier's position on certain issues. But they were in the minority. The audience was generally respectful, and many people expressed appreciation that they had the chance to put questions to the Premier.

There were security people there, but I guess they were on the job as a precaution. They didn't have much to do, because no one was causing trouble.

It was good to get to a Town Hall meeting, because there are so few of them being held these days.

I fancy myself a veteran of Town Hall meetings, having been exposed to them for almost 30 years.

In his first incarnation as an MP, Garth Turner held lots of them. His constituency in those days included Caledon, and much of what I know of Canadian politics I learned from covering such meetings. Sometimes the crowds were large, and other times he and his wife Dorothy and I sat around and just shot the breeze. Sometimes the crowds were less than respectful, and being a human being, Turner occasionally let his anger show a bit more than maybe he should have. But at least he was never afraid to face his constituents and hear what they had to say.

During the more than five years I worked in Toronto, the area I covered included five or six federal ridings. At least one of those MPs was next to impossible to get hold of, except at election time. Actually two of the others held Town Halls.

John Godfrey had two or three a year, maybe getting 30 people out at a time. David Collenette, who was Minister of National Defence, also held a couple a year, and usually drew about 150 people per session. I remember one evening when there was a heckler protesting outside the school where he routinely held his meetings. The man was angry about what saw as excessive spending to maintain Collenette's ministerial office, and I asked the Minister about that after the meeting.

?I don't know what the hell he's talking about,? I remember him replying, with a certain amount of exasperation in his voice, as he proceeded to tell me his side of the story. From that day on, Collenette and I got along very well. Up until then, he had seemed very cautious when he had to deal with me. After that, there were times he would call me out of the blue with story tips.

I think these Town Hall meetings are a great way for elected officials to touch base with their constituents.

That's just what Wynne was doing the other night, and no matter what people might think of her government, those on hand for the meeting were appreciative of the chance to question her or vent.

There is a perception among many people that elected officials don't care beyond the next election. There are some who probably fit

into that group, but I think most of them are interested in what their constituents say and think. Thus, I've always been a little puzzled as to why more politicians don't hold them. True, some of the people who attend these meetings can be abusive. But that, alas, is part of what goes with the job

