

Bill Rea ? We have to lose old friends

It's interesting how an idea can be either appealing or repellant, depending on how many details you have. That was the case with last week's Provincial budget that was brought down by Finance Minister Charles Sousa. Of course the whole thing quickly became academic, once NDP Leader Andrea Horwath announced Friday that her party was not going to prop the minority Liberal government up any longer. My attention was caught by plans that Sousa announced for an Ontario Pension Plan. I will confess that my initial reaction was negative, fearing this was going to be just another cash grab on the part of the government. The plan would be to take up to 1.9 per cent of the pay of people like me, who don't have a corporate pension plans. My blood started to boil a bit when I heard that, suspecting that 1.9 per cent was going to be aimed at getting the government out of the financial pit it got itself into over gas plants, or other uses of which I wouldn't approve. And employers would be expected to match those contributions. One of the nice things about having people in government is it would be up to them to explain that one to my boss, because I certainly wouldn't be willing to take on the task. But then I started thinking a bit, realizing this would basically be a provincial version of the Canada Pension Plan, which many of us are counting on to be there for us when we retire. It's not such a bad thing, assuming the money is in the coffers to go to the people it's intended for, like retired people. Although I am a self-confessed workaholic, casual thoughts of retirement occasionally pop into my head. I'm now 56. In about 20 years, those casual thoughts might get kind of serious, in a casual sort of way. Thirty years from now, I might reach the stage of actual casual planning for retirement. I have spent my entire career working in the private sector, and at my age, I'm not likely to get hired to a position that's going to put me in line for a government pension (although never say never). I have also never worked for a company with a corporate pension plan, and at this stage of my life, I'm not anxious for that to change. I am, however, fully aware that government has to address issues of demands on the pension system, and do it pretty soon. People in my age group make up the tail end of the post-war baby boom. All those little bundles of joy like me who came into the world during the late '40s and 1950s are looking to retirement and are expecting government to be there for them. And it's not going to be a simple question as to whether or not government has the money as required. The case is government had better come up with the scratch, because it's the baby boomers who are going to be expecting it. Don't count them out! It was the baby boomers who stood up in vast numbers against 'the establishment' in the 1960s. It was the baby boomer generation who yelled 'Hell no! We won't go!' when American President Lyndon Johnson suggested military service in Southeast Asia, which resulted in Johnson writing his memoirs about four years earlier than he had planned. These young people were part of a generation that was notorious for not taking guff from their parents. And they are about to represent the largest, best-informed, best-educated and most politically savvy group of seniors in history. Don't count on them taking much guff from their kids. Let government tell baby boomers they will not be getting the retirement benefits that they have spent their lives expecting, and I predict a hell of a lot of politicians and civil servants are going to be sent to bed without their supper. But there is another reality. I am getting old, and I have known for many years that I would eventually get old. I have been aware of that from the time when I first entered the work force. As I alluded to in my column last week, my parents always nagged me to make sure I made my RRSP contributions, and for many, many years, I have set aside portions of every pay cheque for investments. Granted, there have been good times and bad. The markets have been doing quite well lately, meaning I smiled a lot in the last month as I opened the various quarterly statements that appeared in the mail. I have not been looking forward to the advent of old age, but I did know it was coming and took steps to prepare for it. I will go to my grave wondering why there aren't more people like me. True, my planning is predicated on the assumption that I will live to be an old man. Well, that's my plan

My old friend

Brian Gilchrist was the reference archivist at the Peel Art Gallery Museum and Archives (PAMA). I would occasionally give him a call, partly to pick his brain about some historical information I needed. That was the official reason. The real reason was I wanted to touch base with an old friend. Brian died last week. He was 58. I had been aware that he had been having some health issues, but things were obviously a lot worse than I had realized. He was one of my oldest friends with whom I was still in touch. We went back to our high school days in Toronto.

Brian was two years ahead of me. But we were both very involved with the music department in the school (we were in the various choirs) and we hung around with the same crowd ? I honed my euchre skills at the table at which we both sat, and my wife has benefitted at a lot of tables since then.

Like so many people going through that period of life known as adolescence, I did not make friends easily. Acceptance was something that was very precious to me, and Brian was part of that. For that, he has always had my gratitude.

Since we all had good friends in high school, all of you must have gone through the passage of time, as friends drift apart to explore their other interests. Brian's interest, of course, was history, with a specialty in genealogy (family trees). In one of those cases that will tell you just how small this world is, my late aunt (my father's sister) decided about 30 years ago to work on the Rea family tree, and signed up for a night course. Guess who the instructor was. Once he saw my aunt's maiden name, Brian immediately made the connection, much to her astonishment.

I required some help with a story I was working on last fall, and Brian was among those to whom I turned. He suggested a number of sources I could consult, several of them I had already used. Then I made the mistake of casually mentioning that I had also gone to Wikipedia. Oh man, did I ever get bawled out for that.

Our phone calls took place at intervals of a couple of months. There was always some talk about getting together some day for lunch. Brian and I never did, evidently figuring we'd do it next time.

There's a lesson there. If there's an old friend you've been putting off doing lunch with, stop putting it off, lest the next time never comes at all.

Next time for sure, my old friend

