

Godspeed, David Onley

It feels these days there are few areas on which everyone can agree.

We only have to look as far as social media to see that if you have an opinion, however pedestrian, on even the most inconsequential things, sharing that view could result in an endless war of words.

We can see it in our corridors of power, where the quest for the aforementioned power can make hay out of the minutia with the big picture getting lost in the weeds, and everyday citizens left out in the cold.

Just about everywhere you look there is division of some sort, so when something comes up that just about everyone can agree with, it's something you notice and sit up and pay attention to.

Such was the case this past Saturday when Lieutenant-Governor Elizabeth Dowdeswell, the King's representative in Ontario, announced the death of her immediate predecessor, David Onley.

Through his capacity as Colonel of the Regiment for the Aurora-based Queen's York Rangers regiment, I came to know him and his wife, Ruth Ann, just a little bit better than some public figures. Through their extensive work with the Regiment and, in Mrs. Onley's case, through volunteerism with local organizations, their names and faces frequently graced our pages.

First approached by the Prime Minister's Office in 2006 to let his name be up for consideration as the next Lieutenant-Governor, Onley, who battled polio as a child, saw this as a way to further his personal mandate to be a visible and vocal advocate for accessibility issues and concerns.

But only after what he described as an "intellectual wrestling match."

"It was a matter of weighing what I thought might be some of the negatives versus what I really hoped I would achieve if I was appointed," Onley told me in a 2014 interview as his term of office, the longest in Ontario up until that point, was coming to an end. "In my letter (to let my name stand) I was very specific in saying it was time for a person with a disability who was otherwise capable of doing the job to hold that position and I was that person."

"By definition, I was going to be creating an awareness just wherever I went because it would be such a visible visual signal to people, and it certainly has been. I think it has changed the dialogue where at the beginning [of my term] we were talking in terms of accessibility in a physical sense and, in a matter of a couple of years, it transitioned to a whole process for employment for people with disabilities because unemployment levels are so catastrophically higher than it is for the general population."

At that point, he had hoped to have many more opportunities to continue the dialogue once his term had wrapped, and he did just that "maintaining a high profile over the next eight years in a variety of capacities in the public eye, all of which harkened back to that original mandate he gave himself, not only in his career as a broadcaster, not only in representing the late Queen at the Provincial level, but in his day-to-day life."

"As Lieutenant-Governor, and throughout his life, he worked tirelessly to raise public awareness about accessibility issues, encouraging people to "see the ability, rather than the disability," said Premier Ford in a statement. "He was also a great champion of expanding reconciliation efforts between Ontario's Indigenous peoples in his role as representative of the Crown, work that continues to this day. His contributions to the province and his unwavering commitment to public service will long be remembered and celebrated."

Added Ontario NDP leader Marit Stiles via Twitter, "[Onley's] work to break down barriers for people with disabilities will have a lasting impact on our province. We can honour him by continuing his work to build a truly accessible Ontario."

"David C. Onley was a champion and advocate for the rights of people with disabilities," noted Ontario Liberal interim leader John Fraser. "His dedication and commitment to his cause has made a difference in the lives of many."

Former premier Kathleen Wynne also shared her insights, praising him as an advocate and leader.

"He was such a man of dignity and so respectful of the political process and the need to analyse what was going on," Wynne told The CBC over the weekend. "I have such a deep respect for him. It was so clear that he was thrilled to be in the role of Lieutenant-Governor, but his passion was to demonstrate that everyone should have a chance to live their fullest."

And it's safe to say that he more than fulfilled his mission, one which will live on for generations to come.

David Onley changed Ontario for the better, using his profile on television and at Queen's Park to look beyond himself and what he could gain from his position to improving the lives of people who saw him fulfilling his role using a mobility device and perhaps thought, "That looks like me," or "If he can do it, so can I."

And all that without the political burden that comes with elected office - no need to grandstand to lawmakers on both sides of the corridors of power, score political points for some ill-defined "base," or having to please political donors who invested in a campaign.

That is, in my opinion, one of the beauties of having an apolitical person in an apolitical role, representing the Crown, which in and of itself is intended to be above politics.

"It was somewhat overwhelming when you just realize how many protocol factors were at work determining where you could speak, who you could speak to, what you could speak about, how you had to remain apolitical," he told me on the same occasion. "As a former reporter and political science student, I was used to making comments about political matters and had to suddenly stop that."

As he got deeper into the role, Onley said he saw some people in Ontario had some misconceptions about the role of the Lieutenant-Governor which he tried to address head-on in an effort to "enhance the relevance" of the office both to the community and to the "culture of Ontario."

Judging by the outpouring of love from all corners of Ontario upon news of his death, from all political stripes, from people with all abilities, I think he did just that and we're all the richer for it.