

Grasping unity before it slips away

Under sunny Toronto skies last week, Doug Ford was sworn in for a second term as Ontario's Premier alongside his new and returning cabinet.

There were many returning faces to the various portfolios that make this Province tick, including King-Vaughan MPP Stephen Lecce in the Education file, and other returning faces in new gigs.

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones, for instance, has traded her role as Solicitor General of Ontario for roles recently vacated by the former Newmarket-Aurora MPP Christine Elliott upon her decision to not seek re-election: Deputy Premier and Minister of Health.

It was a time for Ontarians to see its government in action and for the Premier to set the tone for the next four-or-so years ahead. In doing so, the Premier touched upon many of his key platform planks, including harnessing the power of Ontario's vast mineral supply, the perennially elusive topic of cutting red tape, and, for better or worse, reiterating his commitment to building Highway 413 and the Bradford Bypass.

So far, so the same ? but given the context of world events last week, I couldn't help but be struck by what the Premier termed the ?Ontario Dream.?

It's often joked that cultural trends in the United States take a few extra years to take root on the north side of the border, but I think we can all agree, even reluctantly, that there's some truth in the gag.

As our southern neighbours question just what the so-called ?American Dream? now represents, and even what it truly represented in the first place, we've now been presented with an equally vague idea of what it means in an Ontario context.

?There's never been a more important time for our democracy to remain strong because now is the time to unite, now is the time to work together,? said Ford from the steps of Queen's Park. ?We're ready to unite behind a positive vision, ready to unite behind a plan for the future of Ontario. I truly believe, I feel it in the bottom of my heart, that this is a government that must represent everyone. As long as I am Premier, this government will strive every day to represent all of our great Province. Our blue-collar workers, our labour unions, entrepreneurs and innovators, drivers and transit riders, seniors and young families, newcomers looking for good work and the Ontario dream: urban, suburban and rural communities in every region of the Province.

?This is Team Ontario and now more than ever we need unity because the road ahead, it won't be easy. Big challenges lay on the horizon across Canada and around the world. Inflation is driving up the cost of living to levels we haven't seen in decades and with an uncertain global economic climate we're competing against other jurisdictions for every job and for every dollar of investment, but when we stand together, when we unite, we're absolutely unstoppable.?

Here, Premier Ford has given himself a tall order.

In today's heated and fractured political landscape, it's admirable that he is, apparently, striving to form a government that represents everyone, but how realistic is that idea? It is going to take more than platform planks which garnered the Progressive Conservatives one of the lowest voter shares in Ontario history to bring people together. Ontarians have already had their say, the results were clear, and they were far from decisive.

While the so-called pocketbook issues offer some avenues for people across all political stripes to find common ground, the PC's plans for affordability, housing, the environment, and healthcare have proved rife with multiple roadblocks on the road to unity.

Another pitfall, sadly, is the very idea of ?unity? itself.

While we all more or less agree on what the idea actually means, over the course of the pandemic, 'unity' has in many ways been co-opted by certain groups who actively seek to divide and then call for people to acquiesce to their demands in the name of that 'U' word.

'There has never been a more important time for our democracy to remain strong because now is a time to unite,' said Ford in a statement that bears repeating in this column space, but we're going to need more than what was presented on the campaign trail to make that a reality.

As last week demonstrated, the fundamental rights that we enjoy in Canada are, for our American cousins, now radically under threat.

The Supreme Court of the United States' decision to strike down Roe v. Wade is terrible in and of itself for the health, safety and security of women and, in turn, the rest of society. But the opinion from Justice Clarence Thomas removed almost all doubt that they're not stopping with stripping abortion rights. Equal marriage and contraception are firmly in his crosshairs.

You might say the same thing can't happen here ' but, if this is indeed your perspective, you're not paying attention.

Just take a moment to ask just where your MPs and MPPs stand on these issues. The answers might surprise you.

We're sadly living in a time where all too many would like to roll back the clock, painting every advancement, move towards equity, and steps taken to broaden perspectives with the equally broad brush of 'woke' when, once upon a time, these ideas were considered the result of education, seeing and accepting different perspectives, or simply taking stock of the realities of our complex world.

We're living in a time where some politicians in this country are feeding on this vitriol, taking notes from an American playbook that was rejected less than two years ago, and are all too eager to try and divide and conquer.

We're living in a time when these people are becoming ever-more emboldened and abandoning any attempts to hide what their true intentions are. For some, it's a stark warning but, for people on either side of an issue at hand, it's a call to action.

A key pillar of keeping our democracy strong and restoring unity is, in my view, a clear blueprint of what our governments at all levels, and their leaders, will do to ensure the rights of all Canadians are truly protected with existential threats coming from all corners.

'Big challenges' are indeed on the horizon 'across Canada and around the world' but we need more than a single focus on pocketbook issues to tackle them, as the threat of another illegal occupation of our nation's capital this week just in time to celebrate the country we are on July 1 could illustrate.

It's time to broaden focus and 'get it done.'