

Honouring the extraordinary

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

As we look forward to an influx of vaccine supply this month, and thus taking a very welcome step towards a return to normalcy, we're well on our way to realising the normal we've only been able to imagine and reimagine for the last 15 months.

Around this time last year, I think it is fair to say that the return to normal we all wanted was, well, a return to the normal we had previously enjoyed. Now, however, I think we're looking a bit further outside of the box.

Many of the things we previously considered normal and necessary have proved to be anything but. We have re-evaluated our necessities versus nice-to-haves. We've re-thought and reconfigured the office. We've learned that despite previously going out every morning with gritted teeth to begin the daily commute, it is not the necessary evil we once thought it was. Perhaps most importantly ? and this isn't a novel thought to be expressed in this space ? we have given significant reconsideration of the persons who are essential in our everyday life.

We have rightfully celebrated the doctors, nurses and health care practitioners who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to keep us healthy and safe in this extraordinarily challenging time. But, by the same token, we have stripped back many a stereotype to realise the downright Herculean efforts made by our grocery store workers, our postal carriers, cashiers, to name just a few, who are also working tirelessly to achieve the same goals, with significant personal sacrifice.

In the first and second waves, we saw the average citizen go the extra mile to salute these frontline workers. And while the third wave might be underscoring the frustration we're all experiencing at the moment, something which might be tempering the public displays of enthusiasm and support that were a bright and shining light in the very dark early hours, I don't think our gratitude has diminished in any way.

Considering the potential new ?new normal? that waits for us on the other side of this now-oft-mentioned light, it is time for us to also consider how we will permanently honour the remarkable work that has been carried out for our greater good ? without question, without complaint and, in many cases, without the supports that are so desperately needed and called for.

While appropriate tributes might include wage increases commensurate with the work that has been carried out, let's leave politics out of the equation and focus on lasting, tangible tributes to these extraordinary people who have risen to extraordinary challenges in extraordinary times.

We've already seen several ideas bandied about, from street murals and other forms of public art dedicated to our frontline heroes to scholarship and bursary funds to support the children of these remarkable individuals as they seek opportunities at higher education. Laudable efforts all around, but there is a prime opportunity to honour these individuals in a very special and unique way lying just around the corner.

Recent buzz from our nation's capital is that Canada will not follow the lead of other Commonwealth nations next year in issuing a medal in honour of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee ? that is, the 70th anniversary of her accession to the throne.

This decision, albeit a decision that is not yet final, would be a break in tradition from 1977, 2002, and 2012 when the Government of Canada issued medals for voluntary service for the Monarch's Silver, Golden and Diamond Jubilees respectively.

The Silver Jubilee medal was established by the Government to honour Canadian citizens ?who have been deemed to have made a significant contribution to their fellow citizens, their community or to Canada? with efforts made to ensure residents of all provinces

and territories were equally represented in the honours list. 25 years later, the Golden Jubilee medal was awarded under much of the same criteria with an extra proviso allowing organizations, particularly those reliant on the work of tireless volunteers, could make nominations of their own.

The Diamond Jubilee medal followed a similar template, but 60,000 medals were awarded across the country in honour of 60 years, making this honour wider-reaching and more accessible than ever before.

And yet, in 2022, any potential plans for a Platinum Jubilee medal appear to be collecting dust on a shelf.

In my opinion, however, honouring those who have served us so well during this hopefully once-in-a-lifetime health crisis with a medal struck to commemorate another once-in-a-lifetime event, albeit one that will be a cause for celebration, is just the ticket.

?The last time there was a jubilee medal in honour of an extraordinary anniversary was 2012, and since then this country has gone through some extraordinary transformations, including coming to terms with part of our darker history, in particular a national effort to reconcile the country's relationship with Indigenous peoples,? wrote John Fraser and Nathan Tidridge in an opinion piece published by the Globe and Mail on New Year's Day. ?This period also covers a time in which a concentrated attention to address overt and unwitting racism has led to efforts to be a more equitable nation.

?We are also in the midst of a pandemic that hopefully will have been conquered by the time the jubilee anniversary begins, and there is a general recognition that key people in many occupations who have been working so diligently to keep us safe deserve to be honoured. These occupations are a microcosm of our country: health workers of all descriptions, but also grocery store shelf stocker and army rescuers, civil servants, and foreign agricultural workers, teachers and technology innovators.

?So, a jubilee ? and this particular Platinum Jubilee ? is not just about recognizing the extraordinary sense of duty and service of the Queen to Canada, but it is also manifestly about recognizing the service and sacrifice made by so many Canadians.?

I couldn't agree more, and I wager that if you look back over the last 15 months there is at least one person you have encountered on the frontlines of this ?war? for whom you would be proud to see a medal pinned to their chest ? from the teachers who have been risking their health day in and day out to educate our youth and being forced to pivot back and forth between in-person and virtual learning, the hospital orderlies and grocery store clerks performing their vital roles while juggling kids learning from home, and the everyday people who have come up with extraordinary solutions to very new problems.

Let's ensure those plans for a medal are dusted off and this unique opportunity to honour these unique heroes isn't wasted. It may not be enough to show our gratitude, but it's a damned good start.