

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Was it all about Harper?

About a thousand years ago ? give or take ? when your correspondent was in the big city daily journalism grind, I was standing at the east door of Queen's Park waiting for my wife to come and pick me up from her work.

Before she arrived, however, then premier Bill Davis and his ever-present entourage, came sweeping out of the door headed for their chauffeur-driven limos.

Davis, always pleasant and friendly, asked what I was doing. When I told him I was headed home for dinner with my family he paused, stared wistfully into the sky for a moment, and said, ?I wish I was doing that.?

Naturally, I asked Davis what he was doing instead, to which he turned to one of his senior aides and asked how many events they had that night ? if memory serves, there were at least six. He said, if he was lucky, he'd be home by midnight.

And that, keep in mind, was just another day in the life of a senior politician. Starting first thing in the morning and ending late at night.

While knocking politicians is a popular sport ? and heaven knows, one I've engaged in numerous times ? I nevertheless often think of that long-ago exchange with Davis and wonder why ? given the lack of public appreciation and acceptance anyway ? anybody would subject themselves to that lifestyle.

I was reminded of this again Saturday upon reading an excellent article in The Globe and Mail by journalist Roy MacGregor, in my view one of Canada's best writers (and, in the interests of full disclosure, a good personal friend of mine.)

In any event, MacGregor had a 20-minute sit-down the day before in Victoria, B.C. with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, producing an article that went beyond the usual political bromides and actually delved into the true feelings of Harper, not an easy subject for in-depth probing.

Given the nature of the current campaign, Harper obviously has considerable support out there. One the other hand, he has also engendered considerable animosity among many Canadians, a lot of whom are calculating their vote on which of the two main opponents, Liberals or New Democrats, are best positioned to boot him out of office.

Like any leader who has been around a long time, Harper has been subject to some extraordinary personal attacks ? the Toronto Star, for example, has spent the last month running at least one op-ed essay every day supposedly detailing how the mean-spirited, dictatorial prime minister has ruined the Canada that we have all come to know and love ? whatever that is actually supposed to mean.

MacGregor referenced what noted American journalist Charles Krauthammer ? a trained psychologist by profession ? dubbed the ?Bush Derangement Syndrome,? which he described as an ?acute onset of paranoia in otherwise normal people in reaction to the policies, the presidency ? nay ? the very existence of George W. Bush.?

No doubt some Canadians see Harper that way ? just as they saw both Conservative Brian Mulroney and Liberal Pierre Trudeau (Justin's dad) near the end of their long tenures at 24 Sussex Drive.

Asked about that by MacGregor, Harper said, ?I detach myself from most of that. I focus on what I'm trying to do. I'm trying, to the best of my ability, to serve the country and promote the wider interest of Canadian families. And I understand that being in public life ... is all about being held to account, whether that's fair or unfair, whether it's flattery or kind of extreme denigration.?

?In my case it's not what I focus on. I've got a job to do. I love my job, but I am very busy I really haven't got the time to spend on people sitting at home tweeting nasty messages. I just don't care about that. I care about trying to make people's lives better.?

Harper concedes that he has ?personality trait(s)? that not everybody appreciates. (Don't we all, I would ask?) But he says, ?It's not about me I think as soon as they get a sense of a politician that it's kind of all about him, his kind of being a life-sized personality strutting upon the stage ... I think people would be very suspicious of that.?

That's likely true, but, for many voters, this election is all about Harper. For some, that's good. For others, it's their motive to vote him out.

Emotions aside, on most objective measures, he's done a pretty good job during tough world-wide economic and social upheavals. But people usually don't set their emotions aside, and by this time next week we'll know whether the whole exercise was about Harper or not.

