

No points to score playing the Blame Game

by BROCK WEIR

After weather threatened to pour lukewarm water all over long-held plans on Sunday afternoon, there was a bit of time to explore the city.

Prior to the pandemic, city strolls were a regular part of the weekend routine, exploring some of Toronto's gems that are a bit further off the beaten path.

With a planned trip to Toronto Island scuttled due to threatening skies that ultimately materialized into very little, Kensington Market was the new destination. The neighbourhood has always been a favourite place of mine, but for some reason I'd only skirted around its perimeter since the plague clouds descended in 2020.

It was nice to be back and, as luck would have it, significantly more street vendors, musicians and buskers were roaming around, signalling that things were not only back to normal, but that some of the pivots, re-thinks, and re-calibrations we've all had to make over the last few years made things even better than they were before.

It was nice to see that things had rebounded, but, as we all know, not all the changes that have taken place since 2020 are altogether rosy.

The flipside of the coin was not far behind.

Heading back from the 'Big Smoke' via the TTC, and specifically via St. Patrick station, a curious interaction unfolded before my eyes. Well, more accurately, before my ears.

'If you see something, say something,' is a refrain familiar to anyone who has had to wait more than three or four minutes for the next train.

It's not a phrase original to the Toronto Transit Commission, but it has, in recent years, become ubiquitous to the commute.

Standing there minding my own business on Sunday evening, that very message blared over the loudspeaker. As it feels like I've heard this 'call to action' encouraging everyone to report something that didn't seem right to the powers-appointed-to-be, I didn't pay much attention to it. But the same couldn't be said for a woman who was coming down the escalator headed for my general direction.

Before she passed me, she stopped and found her target: a security guard standing a few feet from the yellow line of safety.

'Yeah, if I see something I'm going to say something!' she said in a voice in sarcasm that reverberated through the metal-sleeved tunnels.

The security guard turned to look at her and, although I couldn't hear what words passed through his lips, they were moving.

Whatever he said didn't seem to do the trick as what followed was a monologue on the part of the new arrival on the platform.

'I see something, I say something, and you guys don't do anything about it!' she continued, spending the next 30 seconds or so offering various riffs on the same topic before going to the other end of the platform.

It didn't seem to matter whether or not she was getting the security guard's dander up ? he had a superb poker face ? and it certainly

didn't seem to matter that the security guard in question had nothing to do with the TTC, but was rather employed to secure the office building just above the station. She saw someone, found something to say and she damn well said it, passing on the blame to a man who had absolutely nothing to with her concerns. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

That, to me, is one of the many flipsides, if there can indeed be multiple flipsides, of the pandemic that hasn't shown any sides of abating: misplaced blame.

Don't get me wrong, misplaced blame is not a new phenomenon.

When the Liberal Party of Canada was elected to form government following the last campaign of Conservative leader Stephen Harper, once the new government was installed all of the country's ills, legitimately or not, were blamed on the outgoing Blues.

Over the last seven to eight years of government, the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, as it always does, to reframe the blame game on the shoulders of Justin Trudeau and his government ? sometimes fairly, sometimes unfairly, ignoring all external factors beyond their control.

Similarly, when Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives formed government in 2018, every ill and misstep was laid squarely on the doorstep of outgoing premier Kathleen Wynne and her government. It was a good talking point taking advantage of the (often misplaced, in my opinion) vitriol Ontario seemed to have for party and leader at that point in our Provincial history, but attempts to continue the narrative have been less successful as the party has had five years to ?clean up the mess? they say they were left and Ms. Wynne is now living once again as a private citizen.

But, back to Toronto.

Before this distanced encounter with a fellow TTC passenger who was more than over the idea of saying something when she saw something as, in her view, nobody was prepared to step up and do anything about whatever she saw, social media users were getting very heated about what they themselves were seeing.

Videos of violence on subways and streetcars, of people using drug paraphernalia on the same modes of transport, and passengers shouting down vehicle operators have been rife as of late.

Over the weekend, many such posts on social media were framed with variations on the theme of ?Welcome to Olivia Chow's Toronto!?

One of several problems with that narrative is Ms. Chow wasn't scheduled to receive her chains of mayoral office until the middle of this week. It may be a new record ? a mayor who hasn't even assumed office yet being blamed for apparent problems that proliferated under the tenure of her predecessor. Maybe there really is something to the old saying that Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did only backwards and in high heels.

Many of Mayor-elect Chow's critics said that she was not the right person to ?fix? what is ?broken? in Toronto. Whether she is or not remains to be seen, but those same critics never seemed to elaborate on the elements or individuals that ?broke? it in the first place.

That, to me, feels like an important piece of the puzzle for a fulsome take on our Provincial seat and the first step in addressing issues across the board.

But, it's all too convenient to cast blame in every direction to see what sticks rather than think critically about identified problems, their causes, and, of course, their solutions.

Critical thinking skills seem, sadly, to be in short supply these days, particularly in an age where so many people appear to be getting

their news through memes and out-of-context or fabricated videos on social media.

With a new emphasis on practical math mercifully finding its place in schools once again, it's high time to renew focus on civics as well and, maybe most importantly, media literacy to counter this unfortunate offshoot of the pandemic.