

Re-energize and re-engage

by BROCK WEIR

It's often said that you can tell a lot about someone by the company they keep.

Personally, I don't know how much water that old adage holds, as circumstances are not always under your control.

If you're a public figure, you regularly find yourselves in situations where everyone wants to have their photo taken with you ?and those situations are often at such a fast pace it's impossible to pre-vet everyone coming your way. If you're a more private individual, it's a bit rude, for example, to RSVP as ?pending? (to quote the iconic Moira Rose) to a friend's dinner invitation when the only thing that is pending is a full guest list for your review.

If you're a kid, of course, the company you keep is often beyond your control.

I had to chuckle last week when talking to a friend about the different types of neighbourhoods we grew up in.

Raised in Newmarket, I was fortunate enough to spend my early childhood on a street that boasted reasonably large detached homes, housing very colourful and memorable personalities, but the real kicker was the large plots of land on which our homes were built.

In the spring and summer, the nature all around kept us endlessly entertained, provided opportunities to learn about the land, and even make it work for us. You got to know the rhythms of this little microcosm in an ever-growing community and, as odd as it might be to say, you got to know its politics as well.

In this case, it couldn't be helped.

We lived on the south end of the street and between our home and the street's outlet near Highway 404 lived a cabinet minister serving in the government of Liberal Premier of Ontario David Peterson. Next door to them, immediately to the south, was the community's serving Progressive Conservative Member of Parliament under Brian Mulroney, and across the street and four doors down was a prominent local fundraiser for the then-burgeoning Reform Party of Canada, a forerunner for today's Federal Conservatives.

As such, it wasn't unusual to see a helicopter land in your neighbour's yard only for Preston Manning to pop out for some hand-shaking. To pick just one example.

Oddly enough, until the MP's time in Ottawa came to an end and they successfully contested the position of Mayor shortly thereafter, we were just short of the municipal level in achieving a political trifecta! By that time, the cabinet minister had retired, so we still stood at two-outta-three.

To say it was a politically happening street was a bit of an understatement and, looking back, I suppose it was an environment in which becoming a so-called ?political junkie? was inevitable ? and I certainly lived up to it.

But it didn't just stoke an interest; it underscored the value of our system of government and, most importantly, the value of being engaged within it. Sure, I was too young to cast a vote myself, but I was actively engaged in which candidates tickled my parents' respective fancies (and why) and, if I had an opinion of my own to offer, did my utmost to run not-always-successful domestic campaigns to get them to see things my way.

By the time came for me to cast my own vote in a consequential election, I took my role, however small, very seriously ? devouring each party's platform, learning who was running to bring the platforms to fruition, attempting to meet them wherever possible, such

as at all-candidates' debates, and come away with what specifically they hoped to achieve for their community.

The excitement of casting that first ballot on that election day is an indelible memory ? and how I wish there were more people in our communities that share in that unique sentiment.

On Monday, with just a few days left in the Provincial Election campaign, Elections Ontario reported nearly 700,000 Ontarians cast their vote in advance voting this year. While more than half-a-million votes are nothing to sneeze at, it clocks in at merely 6.14 per cent of eligible voters.

If that seems paltry, this election's 678,789 advance votes pales in comparison to 1,066,545 voters ? or 9.92 per cent of those eligible ? who did their democratic duty early in the 2022 election.

?Thank you to all voters who participated in advance voting and to the dedicated staff who worked to keep the voting process in Ontario safe, efficient, and secure,? said Chief Electoral Officer Greg Essensa in a statement. ?If you haven't cast your ballot yet, there's still time.?

There's indeed still time, but I would be very surprised if we exceed the 44 per cent voter turnout in 2022, given the fact we're in a winter election where the weather has been less than clement, and the short period of time party leaders and their local candidates have had to engage and interact with their potential constituents.

With that said, given our recent weather challenges, and the challenges our communities have had in fully digging us out, credit must be given where credit is due, so kudos to those determined Ontarians for getting out and doing what is right.

We can only hope that this week's big melt galvanizes residents to get out and do what's right as well, whether they're eager to bolster Doug Ford's mandate, see him toppled in favour of Bonnie Crombie, Marit Stiles, or Mike Schreiner, or whether they're simply supporting the local candidate who best has their finger on the pulse of the community rather than leader or party stripes.

Consistent polls throughout this campaign indicate that we probably shouldn't expect too many surprises after polls close on Thursday night, but no matter who is elected ? and recent by-elections and trips to the ballot box by our recently-estranged American cousins show we can't count anything out ? I hope we can collectively move forward on what needs to be done. Looming Federal election aside.

As attention inevitably ? and rightly ? returns to fighting the Trump Tariffs, which we were told Monday by the US President were still on track for enactment, I hope we can carve out some attention and direct it towards voter engagement.

Generally speaking, when it comes to local events, promising ?light refreshments? can significantly increase turnout, but on the Provincial and Federal front, a heartier meal might be required ? after all, immersive experiences like my childhood's, I'd wager, are pretty rare.

From mandatory voting, to incentivizing voting ? a tax break at year's end or even a toonie when you leave the polling place, to name but two examples ? it's time to get creative.

Our democracy ? whether at the municipal, Regional, Provincial, or Federal level ? is only as strong as its participants: the candidates vying for the job and our collective HR department ? that's all of you.