

Recalculating landmarks

by BROCK WEIR

I hope he doesn't hold a grudge.

Last May, I did a road trip with my brother to see the King and Queen on their brief visit to the nation's capital.

Having lived in Ottawa for several years both as a student and in the early days of my career, I thought I knew the city well. Yet, after an absence of more than a decade, one of the things that jumped out at me was how much the city had changed in that comparatively short window of time.

New buildings filled in gaps where there were previously vacant lots, smaller buildings, or dwellings that were, 10 long years ago, already showing signs of sagging under the pressure of time.

The city had an air of familiarity, to be sure, and I could still navigate it reasonably well, but found myself questioning my normally sound sense of direction with so many of my regular landmarks modified, rebuilt, or otherwise gone.

On that first day, I got us to Rideau Hall and over to our hotel relatively unscathed.

The next day, however, as we left at the crack of dawn to find a place before the Senate of Canada Building for that morning's Speech from the Throne, a gentleman stopped me in my tracks, so to speak.

?Do you know how to get to the train station?? he asked me at the corner of Rideau and Sussex.

I confidently gave him directions to the VIA Rail station, not really twigging in that early hour that he was a little bit beyond walking distance to what I thought was his intended destination.

Thinking I had done at least one good deed for the day before 7 a.m., we proceeded in the direction of the Chateau Laurier to find a good spot in the crowd.

Then it hit me.

There was a good reason he was asking for directions to the train station so far away from where it lay. He was probably not looking to get to the VIA, but rather the O Train, the city's light rail system, which was just metres away. I knew this in the back of my head but, in my defence, the O Train didn't go there ?in my day.?

While I take full responsibility for my blunder, I can't help but wonder ? and worry ? if he thought I deliberately sent him on a wild goose chase, well-removed from where he was hoping to go. (In the off chance you're reading this, my sincere apologies, but, at the time, I was sure I was correct)

It's funny that however much we rely on our GPS systems and verbal directions using any combination of easts, wests, lefts, and rights, we still come to rely on landmarks to get about, particularly in locations we think we know well ? rightly or wrongly!

This past weekend, my mom and I went on a road trip.

It was the annual Lucille Ball Comedy Festival in Jamestown, NY, a trip we've been taking almost every year, and throughout the various incarnations of the festival, for the better part of 25 years, excluding the COVID days.

It's a drive we know well and, relying on GPS, we always go one of two ways to and from the destination. GPS is more of a safeguard, however, as we know the trip well ? and mark the distance from home to the festival more in landmarks than anything else.

The border crossing is one milestone in the trip, as is the semicircular route we go around the City of Buffalo. Beyond Buffalo, it's mostly a straight shot that's punctuated by a groovy place to get gas and food in the median of the highway, connected by a bridge in each direction to the eastbound and westbound traffic. A bit further along, the next landmark is a bit less groovy ? a gigantic, two-to-three-storey tall statue of an Indigenous man. To our eyes, it might seem like an outdated, even problematic representation, but as the statue is on land belonging to the Seneca Nation, I feel like it gets a pass ? I'm not 100 per cent certain on that, but as far as landmarks go, it's hard to miss!

The other route has fewer obvious landmarks, but once we pass through the picturesque town of Ellicottville, a burgh that looks like it came straight out of a Hallmark movie, we know we're almost there.

In recent years, for better or worse, there have been other landmarks.

For the last decade, perhaps longer from the lead-up to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, one could also mark the land by certain properties that had any number of politically-motivated flags flying in the breeze.

Sure, there were a handful of Clinton-Kaine and Harris-Waltz flags along the way, in this part of the country, they were more often flags for Trump-Pence or Trump-Vance and, in at least one case, a ?TRUMP- ____? flag where Pence's name had been physically cut out of the cloth when things went decidedly south between the once-and-future president and his one-and-done veep.

It's a good thing we've never had to find our way by following the flags like some sort of MAGA-leaning Hansel and Gretl duo because we would have been rather lost this time around.

Whereas last year, 2024, and just about any year going back to the time he and Melania came down the escalator, there were dozens and dozens of flags to lead the way, we saw a grand total of zero on the way there and a single example of the blue-starred banner ? just a single one ? on the way back.

I'm not naïve enough to think that the lack of flags and other examples of partisanship along the way is a sure-fire sign that tides are turning ? although, in the interests of fairness, judging by the number of election signs for Chief and other positions, civic interest is very much alive and well in the Seneca Nation ? it's certainly a sign of something.

Could it be dissatisfaction with current leadership?

Perhaps.

Could it be a sign of fatigue when it comes to all things Trump?

Maybe? Hopefully?

Could it be a sign that people are less engaged?

Doubtful.

Could it be a sign that people are less comfortable in showing where their allegiances lie in this heated political climate we all find ourselves in?

I can't say for certain, but what I can say in my experience of spending five days in that pocket of the United States, the people I

talked to were much more emboldened to speak their minds on the issues of the day, rather than shirking back from them, lest they stir any debate or otherwise rock the boat.

While there's always the silent majority to factor in, it might help answer the first two questions above.

While it's often sad to lose a landmark you've come to rely upon, I can't say I experienced that particular emotion on the way down there on Wednesday morning or on the way back Sunday afternoon.

Yet, at the same time, I'm interested, if hopeful, to see how this significant shift will be reflected in mid-term election results and beyond.