

Respect in a changing landscape

Before I came back to journalism, my early career took an unexpected turn.

But, come to think of it, it really wasn't all that unexpected.

I went to school in our nation's capital, so it shouldn't have been all that much of a surprise that my first 'real' job was in the political realm. It was Ottawa, after all, and most people I encountered were either politicians, bureaucrats or their staffers 'or recovering' politicians, bureaucrats and staffers. Or the people who cover both: journalists.

Why I initially went in the opposite direction of what I was studying to do was pure happenstance, but I'm glad the fates had other ideas in mind before gently nudging me back in the path of my chosen profession.

It gave me insight as to how both sides of the proverbial coin operated.

Before walking through the corridors of Parliament, I hadn't a full appreciation of the ins and outs of government, the time it took to come to a reasonable solution 'or resolution' on even the most mundane of matters, or how much showmanship went into Question Period, one of our country's most notable and longest-running repertoire company of political theatre.

Sometimes, a familiar quote from English economist Walter Bagehot would pop into my head when certain ideas, conceptions and myths were well and truly busted: 'If you begin to poke about it, you cannot reverence it?its mystery is life. We must not daylight upon magic.'

Bagehot was speaking about the concept of royalty, but I don't think it's too far off the mark to apply it to our various seats and levels of government as well.

The experience did indeed cast daylight upon what I conceived to be a certain brand of magic 'for better or worse' but as irreverent as I consider myself to be, where appropriate, the respect I had for the systems and offices that were in place were, in many cases, bolstered.

While that respect had rarely wavered 'and I do admit to one or two instances where I've felt that one might need to adjust respect for certain office in conjunction with the respect for the office the office-holder has for said office' in recent years its often felt that we have to continually adjust to what people often describe as 'the political game.'

Social media, for instance, has changed the way politicians communicate with the people they represent, or hope to represent 'again, for better or worse.

Door-knocking, always a perennial favourite for politicians established and aspiring, continues to be pushed front and centre as the bread and butter of any campaign or engagement exercise, and rightly so.

As are ads, flyers, brochures and other forms of analogue communication where a campaign plank or a promise delivered can be summed up with some eye-catching graphics, and a few pithy slogans designed to stick in the minds of the consumer; 'Build the homes. Fix the budget. Stop the crime?' are vague slogans that I think most people would agree with, regardless of where they fall on the political spectrum ('Axe the tax' is a different beast all together, but that's a subject for another column) but the devil is always in the details 'and the deliverables.

Yet, some traditions, whether spoken or unspoken, have been shoved to the back, both a 'tell' of respect for the electorate.

First, the unspoken agreement that if one shows up to exercise their constitutional right to vote, the government that is elected will

serve the term they have been hired to carry out ? not, as the rumours coming out of Queen's Park would suggest, tossing the will of the people out the door and calling another election for the sake of political expediency.

The other is the continued fall-out-of-fashion of the humble political debate.

In the United States, both men looking for another four-year term as President appear to be using the idea of a debate as a means to play a slow-moving game of Chicken. Things aren't quite as bad here, but they're rapidly headed in the same direction.

Several years ago, we, as a paper, organized a debate for candidates seeking a higher level of office beyond the Council table.

In this particular instance, the candidates for the major parties showed up ? but, with one candidate, one got the impression that it was a great imposition, despite the fact that more than 200 residents showed up to hear what they have to say.

?I could be out door-knocking right now,? one heard them say before the start of the session, which was held on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon to give people who couldn't otherwise attend an early evening debate, such as commuters, a chance to hear what the applicants for one of the most important jobs in the community have to say and how they answer very real questions that might be on their own minds.

Now, the people of Mississauga have a new Mayor after a contentious campaign to replace Bonnie Crombie, who has set her sights on higher office at Queen's Park.

The main contender through much of the race, and the ultimate victor, is long-time Council member Carolyn Parrish, who came into the field with several years as a Federal Member of Parliament under her belt.

As the campaign wore on, Parrish has faced criticism for refusing most campaign debates on the basis of ?personal threats? she's received along the way.

?We are respectfully declining all debates,? said the Parrish campaign on social media. ?Our campaign will continue to focus on a positive, productive approach, engaging directly with Mississauga residents. Carolyn is eager to continue meeting with individuals and groups in the short time that remains until election day.?

The campaign did not comment on the nature of the threats.

The fraught nature of our political landscape now cannot be understated.

Threats against our public officials are very real, sometimes organized, and need to be dealt with accordingly and, as such, they are changing the traditional ?rules of engagement.?

But those who are losing in this shifting landscape are the voters ? well, specifically, the genuinely engaged voters who take their ballots seriously and do their utmost to vote on election day or in advance polls.

They should be respected enough to be given the chance to see candidates debate each other face to face, express the issues that matter to them, and see how they will react in the heat of the moment ? after all, voters must select one of these individuals to do that very thing.

They should also be respected enough to follow through on the commitment they've made with the people who have elected them to carry out the mandate assigned to them in the expected timeframe.