

Reverence for well-placed irreverence

by BROCK WEIR

It wasn't all that long ago that our water cooler chatter was about the events of the week.

Big deal, you might say, but this was in elementary school and, when you really get down to it, it was less about talking around the ?water cooler? as it was the stainless steel water fountains that kept us hydrated on the long stretches between recesses.

Wait, this doesn't reflect your own grade school experiences?

Fair enough, I fully admit that our Grade 6 classes were a bit atypical.

There were two such classes at our school and, for better or worse, the male and female teacher leading each decided to divvy up the work and joint classes led by both were neither the exception nor the rule. It just? well, it was just the way things were.

This particular year happened to coincide with a Federal Election, which apparently gave our collective teaching duo more than enough ideas to engage us young'uns with the important issues of the day.

But many of us had a head start.

Maybe there was something in the water, but looking back on this specific season of my youth, we were a bit of an anomaly where a good chunk of the classes were very (and I do mean very) interested in what was then the CBC's one-two punch of This Hour Has 22 Minutes and the Royal Canadian Air Farce.

I know, I know, we were weird. This isn't the likeliest fare that would normally capture the attention of ten- and eleven-year-olds, but there we were.

Maybe we understood the jokes. Maybe we didn't.

We could laugh at the caricatures they spun at the expense of such leaders as Jean Chretien and Preston Manning. Even though we may not have truly known who she was, we could chuckle as the writers and actors sent up the sartorial choices of the late MP Elsie Wayne. We smiled, even when we shouldn't have in retrospect, at their send-ups of Lucien Bouchard that exaggerated the very things that should not have been a focal point. We could even be amused by (and, depending on our own family circumstances, relate to) the marital woes of the then-still-married Prince and Princess of Wales and their satirization of all the people involved in that saga.

Rapid-fire jokes from Marg Delahunty or Marg, Princess Warrior from Mary Walsh on 22 Minutes were ripe for repeating the next school day, and even the less than rapid-fire gags of Air Farce's Mike from Canmore and Jock McBile (John Morgan) were fair game.

Perhaps this is why when we had our in-class elections, with the class divided up into the major political parties and ?party leaders? duly appointed, it was a less than reverent affair ? until it wasn't.

One of the go-getters representing the former Progressive Conservative party and its leader Jean Charest (everything old is new again!) went rather method in his portrayal, being the only ?party leader? to produce election posters for distribution throughout the school. Given our steady diet of television irreverence, however, this spilled over into the campaign when many students took the posters that had been distributed, opened our respective pencil cases, and let our artistry fly in the forms of Groucho mustaches, Coke bottle glasses, etc., scrawled over the leader's face.

Naturally, this riled one of the two teachers, who collected the photocopied fliers, marched us out into the hall for a sound chastising and a not-so-veiled threat of sending all the offending flyers to Charest's office to make an example out of us.

If he actually followed through, we never heard anything further, but maybe this was the beginning of the end and the start of a new trend.

Although 22 Minutes is still on the air, it seems the era of good-natured irreverence on our leaders is well and truly over.

Maybe the stakes are simply too high these days as people, no matter what political colour you bleed, continually push the idea that we're collectively in the "fight for our lives." There doesn't seem to be any room for humour, or even looking at the lighter side of things.

Foibles still come into the fore, of course, but at best they're looked at through a gravely serious lens or, at worst, weaponized into personal attacks or targeted attempts at character assassination.

While I enjoy covering politics, I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief when this year's Provincial Election was done. Why? Simply to get a break from television ads and video ads online that focused less on policy and what each leader or party was pledging to do for the Province over the next four or five years, and more on the messenger.

Despite what the Progressive Conservatives wanted to sell us, Kathleen Wynne (and anyone who was ever in her orbit) was not the boogeyman responsible for all of Ontario's ills. Nor, despite the photos they chose to depict her, was Andrea Horwath ready to menace Ontarians at a moment's notice. Nor, as the opposition parties would have us believe, is/was Doug Ford at the root of everything in Ontario that had to change, and nor was a vote for the Greens and Mike Schreiner nothing less than flushing your ballot down the toilet.

At the Federal level, not every policy presented by the Liberals is a bad one simply because of your personal feelings towards Justin Trudeau as a person or, worse, his hairdo or his sock selection. Nor was every effort by the opposition to hold the Feds to account ridiculous simply because they were offended somehow by Andrew Scheer's dimples or any other alleged foibles highlighted by all successive Conservative leaders, permanent or interim.

In my view, the last couple of elections at both the Provincial and Federal levels have only illustrated how far our public discourse has fallen from a time not-so-far-removed from the present and the reasons for this are well worth a deep dive another day.

But, with another election on the horizon, this time for the persons eager to represent us at the municipal level, it can only be hoped that debate sticks to the vision each person has for our community, including the skills they hope to bring to the table, and less on pure and unadulterated vitriol and very personal attacks.

Apparently we can't handle the levity anymore.

In my more than 10 years covering municipal politics, so far these lower tier trips to the ballot box have been essentially immune to this type of politicking that serves no one, but, unlike the Federal sphere, there was once a time when Provincial politics was blessedly pedestrian.

Hopefully we're still able to keep this genie very firmly in the bottle.