

Riding the waves through a digital washout

by BROCK WEIR

I don't think it's anything ground-breaking or controversial to say that, by and large, the general population doesn't necessarily sit up and take notice of an issue unless it has directly impacted them or someone they love ? or is threatening to do so.

Don't misunderstand me; I'm well aware of the tireless people around us who work day in and day out for countless causes. They recognize problems regardless of whether they have walked down that road themselves, and spend no end of energy brainstorming and executing solutions to the identified problems.

Not at all. Rather, the issues I am talking about are generally more political in nature.

Take, for instance, the results of the recent U.S. Midterm Elections.

In a country that is so bitterly divided at present, with some of the freedoms we hold so dear in Canada always seeming to be on the chopping block down there in what we're continually told is the "most important election in our lifetimes," look at what the results of the election turned out to be.

While furious reaction to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* may have prevented the so-called "Red Wave" that so many pundits had been predicting in the final days of the campaign, regardless of this or so many other nation-redefining issues that were essentially on the ballot, for many their vote simply came down to inflation.

Pocket book issues, again the issues that have the most immediate impact on the individual, are always going to be a key driver any time people go to the polls, but it's not only an economic factor; even issues that are comparatively mundane but have a direct impact on our daily routine can capture the imagination.

In the latter half of last week, people were all atwitter (Don't worry, for this pun, I'll see myself out at the end of the column for another week) over the endless cavalcade of drama coming out of the head office of a certain social media giant that was recently purchased by a billionaire.

After the initial bluster and bravado subsided, the realities of the new and unfamiliar business settled in upon the purchaser. Said purchaser's execution of the decisions that followed illustrated that lack of familiarity with the business model they bought themselves and the building blocks of the company appeared to crack and come crashing down.

With a decimated workforce and cryptic clues trickling out of HQ, users settled in with a proverbial bag of popcorn to watch Twitter's "death" in real time. Suddenly, the giant that was once heralded as a global public square ? for better or so, so, much worse ? was more like the villain of the latest entry in a stalwart horror movie franchise: all the virtual townsfolk came out of their homes to watch the menace die.

How quickly the tides turn in a digital world.

But, as this was going on in the online realm, there was another development that is the complex network of our world ? physical or electronically ephemeral ? that was much more dire and consequential.

As world leaders gathered in Egypt for the COP27 conference on climate change, Simon Kofe, a Minister of the Government of Tuvalu, a Commonwealth cousin, delivered a startling virtual announcement.

Given that projections have the first nation to be irreparably impacted by rising sea levels as Tuvalu, the island nation's government

said they are taking the first steps 'into the metaverse' to ensure their country and their culture lives on digitally when there is no longer land to call their own.

'As our land disappears, we have no choice but to become the world's first digital nation,' said Kofe from a podium placed on a beach with water lapping nearby. 'Our land, our ocean, our culture, are the most precious assets of our people and to keep them safe from harm no matter what happens in the physical world we will move them to the Cloud. Islands like this won't survive rapid temperature increases, rising sea levels, and droughts' so we'll create them virtually. Piece by piece we'll preserve our country, provide solace to our people, and remind our children and our grandchildren what our home once was.

'This is also a matter of sovereignty. We in Tuvalu are taking bold steps to ensure that our statehood and our maritime boundaries are permanently maintained despite extreme land loss due to climate change and sea level rise. Our digital nation will provide an online presence that can replace our physical presence and allow us to continue to function as a state. We have been working on these initiatives for the past year, building our capacity to retain and preserve our nation and the unity of our people even as climate change spirals out of control.

'Global action must be taken to provide the best-case scenario but we in the Pacific are planning and preparing for a worst-case scenario. We need to be able to secure our statehood, our maritime boundaries and our endowments, no matter what happens in the future. The world's inaction has led our Pacific region to take greater action and forge our own path as leaders on the international stage, but our action alone cannot stop the current trajectory of climate change. Only considered global efforts can ensure that Tuvalu does not move permanently online and disappear forever from the physical plane.

'Our Tuvaluan culture dictates that we all must share responsibility for the global predicament caused by the climate crisis.'

As he called for the end of fossil fuel production and emissions, a hefty boost to financing loss and damage, as well as adaptation and mitigation measures, he pointed out that this is not just a Tuvaluan concern, but a global one.

'Without a global conscience and a global commitment to our shared wellbeing, we may soon find the rest of the world joining us online as their lands disappear,' he concluded. 'It has long been the time for action, but we have not stepped up to the challenge. We must start doing so today.'

That certainly puts the Twitter 'death watch' into perspective. While there will always be a new, sexy social media platform to come along and fill up any sort of vacuum and, sadly, provide no end of echo chambers, there will not be another physical Tuvalu if action is not taken.

Nor will there be another physical Canada, that is a Canada as we know it today, in worst-case scenarios.

So, while phone-scrollers make contingency plans on where to continue following their friends, favourite celebs and influencers if the bluebird was found feet-up in the bottom of its cage the next morning, and our leader's take a page out of Nero's songbook, I guess the rest of us can start brainstorming just what we would like to preserve for posterity in a digital Canada.

Let's hope it doesn't come to that.