

Shoulder to Shoulder

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

Heeding the call to don blue and yellow, the national colours of Ukraine, scores of people braced for the blustery snow slowly began to gather at the Aurora Cenotaph on Sunday afternoon to stand in solidarity with the people of the Eastern European nation who have been living through its horrific and ongoing invasion.

Young and old, they stood shoulder to shoulder with a clear message: an attack on any country's freedom is an attack on all of ours.

It was a poignant message and one that never wavered as the crowds flooded the sidewalks leading up to Yonge Street towards an area park where a rally was set to take place.

Despite the cold and the snow whipping against our respective spaces, the hearts of people who came out for the vigil were warmed by the myriad honks from passing drivers that penetrated the brisk atmosphere in a spontaneous show of solidarity.

By the time the crowd reached the rally point and local leaders delivered poignant words on just what the whole afternoon was all about, a silence descended in the park after a pastor led the group in a brief prayer followed by a few minutes of silent reflection.

This time for silent reflection, something that would do us all a world of good whether or not it came on the heels of a religious sentiment, turned out to be anything but.

Those honks, which were but a few minutes before a show of solidarity for people under siege, were of a distinctly different variety. They were the honks of another small group making its way north, proudly waving flags with vulgar messages directed at our Head of Government, calling for mandates to be lifted despite the fact that such deadlines have already been announced, and decorating every vacant space on their vehicles with maple leaves in a sure sign of insecure patriotism.

Much ink has been spilled in recent weeks ? yes, even in this column ? comparing such groups' ideas of ?freedom? which are, in my opinion, woefully misplaced compared to the heroic efforts of Ukrainians who are actually fighting every day for freedoms that are truly under siege.

If it wasn't so disappointing, and if this weren't real life, the irony of self-appointed freedom fighters nearly ? and, it must said in all fairness, most likely inadvertently ? drowning out a moment of silence in honour of those who have either died defending their country and its freedoms, and in solidarity with those who are getting up every morning to fight Russian aggression, would be almost satirical.

Yet, there we were ? but it didn't spoil the moment.

I got the sense that as the rallying group dispersed, some wearing new Blue and Yellow buttons distributed by a local student who has raised thousands of dollars for the Red Cross by selling them in his school and social networks, they were nothing but galvanized ? and, like the first batch of honks that were part and parcel of Sunday afternoon, that was heartening.

There has been a lot of analysis in recent days on the state of unity in our country, particularly in light of the global pandemic. While we have been talking about this issue for quite some time, dialogue accentuated during the Ottawa occupation, the most recent chapter in this discussion has been spurred by a recent Angus Reid/CBC survey that has found four in five Canadians say the country has been pulled further apart by the pandemic.

'Polarization in Canada on the issue of COVID-19 was not always a reality,' say the pollsters. 'In the early months of the pandemic, Canadians were concerned about potentially making others sick and applauding government leadership. Disagreement over restrictions and dissatisfaction with leaders in many parts of the country led to increasing angst in Canada, most prominently on display in recent 'Freedom Convoy' protests.

'Asked how they would describe the change they have seen in the country over the past two years, Canadians are much more likely to see the country as further apart rather than closer together. These opinions are remarkably consistent across age and gender, as well as region by region.

'Canadians have sacrificed greatly over the past two years. Nine in ten of those five years of age and over have had at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, and millions stayed home, wore masks, and respected the wishes of their compatriots who were concerned about illness. Despite this, Canadians on the whole are more likely to say that the pandemic brought out the worst in people.'

The survey report notes that Canadians in the prairies are 'more likely to say that the pandemic has had a negative effect on people in the country, led by Alberta, where nine-in-ten say this.'

The results are, of course, a snapshot of the nation's current pulse.

That is naturally the purpose of the poll, but we're living in a situation where our collective blood pressure is high as we get used to yet another new normal where many people are at different levels as to what they're ready for and indeed on what they feel is overdue.

While some Canadians might be louder than others, I simply don't see a country that has been pulled further apart. Almost invariably across the country, vaccination rates stand in the neighbourhood of 90 per cent or upwards, a pretty damn good showing of unity, as far as I am concerned.

Most people's views on public health restrictions vary, but, if you take the 'convoy' out of the equation, these differences are not nearly wide enough to be unbridgeable.

Every day from this position I see people who have had time to reflect on what matters in life, their goals, their wants out of whatever the ultimate 'new normal' is.

As far as I can see, most people seem to be on a similar page ' even if they're not trumpeting from the rooftops.

Covering the event for our sister paper, standing amongst the people standing shoulder to shoulder on Sunday afternoon, I did not see division, I did not see people coming out just for a walk in the park, I saw people united towards a common cause and people standing in solidarity with a fresh appreciation for the freedoms many of us take for granted each and every day.

And that is something we shouldn't lose sight of.