

Standing Up and Standing Out

by BROCK WEIR

In these days of extremely polarized views, we're all too often in my view bombarded with cases of people being lionized, or even framing themselves, for who they aren't rather than who they are.

Similarly, and particularly in the age of social media, even more try to identify themselves and form an identity based on what they are not or what they oppose, rather than what they're for or, once again, who they are.

As I'm writing this on Valentine's Day, I sometimes joke to friends that the key to a successful relationship these days, unlike in days of yore, is to have more common dislikes than likes as that will save both time and a lot of hurt and disappointment further down the road. And, for better or worse (worse, trust me), social media is better at whittling down potential suitors and suitresses (I looked it up) than the best advertised dating services that claim to have finally nailed down the perfect romantic formula after millennia. What a time to be alive!

But as much as I joke about it, I still think there's some kernel of truth in it.

If you happened to have a blind date on Tuesday night, how disappointing it must have been if, after things were going oh-so-well you found out you and your dining companion had opposing views over vaccines ? or, heaven forbid, find out your date blames the incumbent Prime Minister on everything from their hangnail to the Halifax Explosion? well, where do you go from there?

You go directly back to the original point of this column.

When Justin Trudeau was tapped to lead the Federal Liberals ten years ago this year, for party members who weren't swayed by his then-bright and reasonably unblemished star-wattage were won over by the fact that he was, basically, not his predecessor Stephane Dion.

By the time he won his first mandate from the Canadian people just over two years later, voters who neither bled ?Liberal red? nor were likely to be starstruck simply shrugged, ?Well, he's better than Stephen Harper.?

Two Provincial elections ago, the Progressive Conservatives swept into majority power at Queen's Park after running a campaign focusing squarely on then-premier Kathleen Wynne, seeming to attribute all of the Province's ills to her and the previous years of Liberal government under Dalton McGuinty, under whom she served.

The tactic worked to an extent that ? not to take away anything from Doug Ford or any of the PC leadership candidates who ran alongside him ? the Progressive Conservatives likely could have run seemingly anyone against Wynne to victory.

Despite not being in power for nearly four years by the time last year's Provincial Election rolled around, it felt like the Progressive Conservatives were still running on the idea that Doug Ford was not Wynne, and that his candidates did not serve under Wynne, with about the same weight as their own four-year record at the helm ? and there were indeed some achievements to tout!

I'm not sure if that's more of a statement on Wynne or what they hoped would be their legacy in the event Ontario voters threw things back to the Liberals or the NDP.

The stories, and therefore the legacies, of Trudeau and Ford are yet to be written, but to their supporters they each have a number of accomplishments under their belts that can provide a decent foundation for a legacy well beyond not being Stephen Harper or Kathleen Wynne, but what of John Tory, the Toronto Mayor who announced his resignation last Friday night after admitting to a relationship with a now-former staffer.

The announcement came after a less-than-stellar few weeks at City Hall, in particular its continued war against the unhoused and the remarkable decision against funding emergency warming shelters 24/7 in the middle of winter.

‘I think it is important as I always have for the Office of the Mayor not to in any way be tarnished and not to see the city government put itself through a prolonged period of controversy arising out of this error of judgement on my part, especially in light of the challenges we face as a city,’ he told reporters while announcing his resignation.

Later in the same speech, he added: ‘I want to thank the people of Toronto for trusting me as mayor. It has been the job of a lifetime and while I have let them and my family down in this instance, I have nonetheless been deeply honoured by the opportunity to serve the people of this wonderful city and I believe I did some good for the city, that I did make a positive difference for the city that I truly love, particularly during the pandemic.’

While Tory might truly love Toronto, and he did indeed manage the City of Toronto well during the height of the pandemic (and, yes, this is yet another gentle reminder that the pandemic is not over), and while he did make a positive difference at the helm, much of the assessment from Toronto’s talking heads since the surprise announcement praised Tory for, well, for not being his controversial predecessor.

That, in itself, is a sad state of affairs and not a laurel upon which anyone should rest.

In these extremely divisive times, it’s become more commonplace to tout what we aren’t rather than what we are. It’s not enough for a politician like Pierre Poilievre to win the hearts and minds of people by touting the obvious fact that he’s not Justin Trudeau.

Nor is it enough for Doug Ford to underscore that he’s not a once or future Liberal.

Nor will it be enough for the next Ontario Liberal leader to whip up support by reminding voters that they’re not Doug Ford.

Our leaders, and all of us when you really get down to it, need to have a sure sense of who they are, what they stand for, and what they hope their legacy might be. It might be an uncomfortable process, but we’ll be the richer for it.

And it’s not hard to find a good blueprint.

Love her or not, the eulogies given to former Mississauga mayor were a testament to the venerable leader having a true sense of herself and the city she fostered.

Also look to our community leaders at large whose work is rightly taking centre-stage during Black History Month

The persons leading these valuable community commemorations and fostering community connections not only have strong senses of self, but are very clear what they’re fighting for rather than just what they’re fighting against.