

Supporting local, buying Canadian and finding balance

by BROCK WEIR

The last few weeks haven't been particularly friendly for those of us who are predisposed to cabin fever.

Mountains of snow have conspired to block the most obvious paths between Point A and Point B; the occasional warm-ups have made the mountains a little bit easier to traverse, at least on the surface. These surfaces often cover up untold depths of slush, another obstacle to navigate, which, come the frequent flash freezes, result in sheets of ice that would make even the most novice curler go back to get a rock.

The projected warm-up this week should take care of much of the remaining mess, a boon for those of us who are eager to make the most out of the great outdoors again, but it hasn't been solely a time to hunker down and hibernate until more clement days arrived.

Hopefully, for instance, you were among the paltry 45.4 per cent of eligible electors who made their way to a ballot box for February 27's Provincial Election, a pitiful number by any estimation. Perhaps you took the time to lace up for one of the coldest Coldest Night of the Year events in recent memory. Maybe you simply enjoyed some wintery fun in our trails or parks.

A couple of weeks ago, when there was a sweet spot between the snow, I ventured into the city to go to one of my favourite independently-owned specialty shops. A place in which I have been a loyal customer for more than 30 years, it was in the heat of their annual February Sale, and I'm never one to turn down a treasure hunt. And few places in Toronto, given my particular interest in television history, have provide a greater chance for a successful hunt!

Since I first crossed their threshold when I was eight-years-old, I've built up a good relationship with the two individuals who have been operating the store with remarkable consistency since then.

Or, so I thought.

This last visit was something of a different experience as one of the guys behind the cash register had the gall to think of himself (I kid) as he up and got married, moved out of the city, and is presumably enjoying a new wave of domestic bliss.

After so much time walking through the door and being greeted by familiar faces, it was jarring enough to see someone new on the till; what took things over the top, however, was being greeted by an unfamiliar face who didn't already know the types of things I was looking for.

This is not a complaint, mind you ? after all, there's plenty of time to get to know the new kid on the block and rebuild those retailer-customer ties ? but rather to point out that the vague discomfort felt, simply brought about by change, is a testament to the power of such ties that can only come with supporting strong, independent businesses and retailers.

A lot has been said and written recently, and rightfully so, on how Canada can best respond to tariff threats levelled at us by the U.S. President. Many of us are wading our way into what it means to Buy Canadian ? and the differences between ?Made in Canada?, ?Product of Canada?, ?Manufactured in Canada?, ?Assembled in Canada?, ?Made from Domestic and Imported Ingredients?, and many other nuances not listed here.

It's not always easy to keep track and it's not always easy to find homegrown alternatives to some products. Sometimes, as well, it's simply not practical ? as illustrated by one acquaintance of mine who was looking for alternatives to the only food their neurodivergent son can eat without any qualms, and whether it was worth upsetting the apple cart, their fought-to-establish routine, and both his stomach and his peace of mind to find alternatives that support Canadian producers.

Since these threats have wafted our way, I've noticed some subtle behavioural changes from my fellow customers when navigating the crowded aisles of the grocery store ? a crowdedness that seems to be attributable, at least in part, to people foregoing grabbing a product and throwing it in the cart without a second thought. Now, in my observation, they are lingering, if only for a moment, to double check labels, tags and other signage to help them make an informed decision.

This is all well and good, but we should be taking a multi-faceted and mindful approach to letting our wallets do the talking.

It's tricky in this day and age to support Canadian businesses in a way that also supports Canadian workers. So many of our neighbours are employed by American-owned businesses that operate out of this country either independently of the parent or as a subsidiary thereof.

We have to be conscious that our decisions in letting our aforementioned wallets speak doesn't adversely affect our neighbours who are in that situation.

One quick win we can achieve is foregoing self-checkouts. It might take a little longer to get on your way after picking up what you need from their groaning shelves, but it will help underscore to the powers-that-be the importance of our homegrown human resources.

The number of Canadian workers an American company might employ in our country could also be a factor to consider in weighing what we should buy, when, and from whom.

Any incoming tariffs are estimated to impact hundreds of thousands of Canadian jobs, so our own personal responses should not be in a way that exacerbates that particular problem.

Buying local wherever possible ? whether it is a local retailer or a local producer, such as the myriad farmers and artisans that we boast around our communities ? is probably the safest bet. We're not only supporting Canadian, but we're keeping money in the community, and that's always a win-win.

As unimaginable as the tariffs are, the renewed emphasis on shopping local and buying Canadian is probably the one silver lining in all this slush. That was also one of the few silver linings to be found at the height of the pandemic, as well, at least for a time. That, however, faded somewhat amid backlash against restrictions and any other calls on Canadians to row in the same direction in the face of the slightest inconvenience.

This time, however, we need to band together to ensure the momentum is on our side for the next four years, at the very least.

It won't be easy, but being considerate of the impact of each and every purchase you make will only serve us well ? not only for your own bottom line and our local economy, but for our sense of community as well.

Having a 30-plus year relationship with a small, independent retailer wasn't an unusual instance not too long ago; a relationship where the business owner knows their customer's likes, dislikes, tastes ? and even what might or might not be within their budgets. It's something you aren't likely to forge with Big Box Retailers or online behemoths, despite the best efforts of their pernicious algorithms.

A trip back to basics ? with balance and flexibility ? could well make us all stronger.