

The Death of Democracy

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Perhaps the title of this particular column sounds a little dramatic. Democracy after all, according to people like freedom convoy supporters, has been on death's doorstep here in Canada for quite some time. Still others believe, as Sir Winston Churchill once said, that "democracy is the worst form of government ? except for all the others that have been tried," implying all systems are terrible and perhaps we shouldn't worry too much about democracy's untimely demise. Why I am worried, however, and what has led to such a stark statement, is the end of the publication of 70 community newspapers whose primary focus is on local journalism.

We all know there is no such thing as a perfect world, but in about as close as we will ever get to one, democracy is indeed an imperfectly perfect form of government. One of the reasons this is so, has to do with a free and unbridled media who ask questions and remain dedicated to the relentless pursuit of truth in the face of an increasingly fake news dominated media environment. Consider what group exists that attempts to keep politicians in check? Media. Ask yourself who are the fact-checkers? Journalists. How are the masses kept informed about both world and local events? Through print media, including your local, community newspaper. Consider who shares the good news stories, the births and deaths in a small town? Where are the sports pages in which you might catch a glimpse of your grinning child and their little league team or a photo of an emerging hockey star we will see again in later years during a flashback segment on their career? It's certainly not the large dailies who share those glimpses into community life ? it's your local print newspaper and much of that is coming to an end for 70 communities including possibly, right here in Caledon.

Local journalism is where new reporters head to earn their credentials, where they learn to hone their craft and how to question local officials while dreaming of the big leagues and holding our Prime Minister and other senior elected officials to task. Reporting on local initiatives provides the grounding needed to tackle the larger investigations ? moving from a story on saving turtles or local salamanders to holding the Ontario government to task on the greenbelt fiasco. It's the media who hold the government to account (or try to anyway) and who inform us, the general public, sharing the news we all should know more about. Locally, it is also your community newspaper who employ your friends and neighbours, not just as journalists but in advertising, classifieds, printing and graphic design. Local media provides an avenue for your local bookstore or butcher shop to advertise their small business and in turn earn your support, perhaps then enabling that shop to support the local little-league team through sponsorship. In a free and democratic society, the freedom to own a business, hold elections and employ journalists to hold officials accountable are each fundamental cornerstones. If you think the closing of a local newspaper is no big deal ? think again.

Moving to an online only format in a digital world might sound like it makes sense, but in an age where fake news abounds, where discernment of information is at an all-time low and where right now, large companies like Meta are blocking the sharing of news information on our social media platforms, the local print edition of the paper feels like the only place one can reliably rely on the news. What happens when no one holds the local government to account? Does it begin the slow spiral toward the decline of holding provincial, or even federal governments to account?

Local media matters and I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say we should be concerned that without it, democracy risks being overcome with graft and corruption.

Lana Payne, Unifor's national president (representing some of the newspaper employees impacted) said it best: "This is devastating. Devastating for these media workers. Devastating for local news. Devastating for the communities who depend on that local news and devastating for the fabric of our democracy?". The horrible irony of this announcement happening on World Democracy Day only deepens our awareness of what this loss will mean.?

It is a very slippery slope indeed from not reporting on local news, to not having access to accurate information, to the pervasive proliferation of false information, to either no information at all, or government dictated and directed information.

When that happens, no one is being held to account at all and democracy? It dies.