

The value of full public discourse

by BROCK WEIR

Things were looking great for Richard Nixon before he sat down with a young, upstart Senator from Massachusetts.

Banking on his track record as U.S. Vice President to Dwight D. Eisenhower, he gave off an air of confidence, maybe even a sense of stability in a country still recovering from two major international conflicts.

Then, the television cameras began to roll.

While the duo debated issues that impacted the American people, the longest-lasting images to come out of the ratings-busting chin wag were the beads of sweat pouring down Nixon's forehead while his calm, cool and collected opponent, John F. Kennedy, won the hearts and minds of enough of the U.S. population to win the Presidency.

The late JFK came into the conversation once again in the 1980s thanks to another Vice President ? well, a vice-president to be. In 1988, George H.W. Bush's running mate, Dan Quayle, sat down to debate Democratic Vice-Presidential challenger Lloyd Bentsen, in the heat of that year's election to replace Ronald Reagan.

The real meat of the debate was overshadowed by one particular exchange.

?I have far more experience than many others that sought the office of the Vice President of this country,? said Quayle. ?I have as much experience in the Congress as Jack Kennedy did when he sought the presidency. I will be prepared to deal with the people in the Bush administration, if that unfortunate event were ever to occur.

Bentsen replied, ?Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy.?

Alas, anything of consequence that may have come out of this debate, as far as civic discourse is concerned, took a back seat to those last five words, but it also influenced the course of the campaign's balance.

Here at home, we have a few examples of moments in debates becoming the defining component of a campaign.

In 1984, Liberal Prime Minister John Turner and Conservative challenger Brian Mulroney went head-to-head in an English language debate. With the latter demanding Turner apologize for a number of appointments that were seen as patronage, the soon-to-be outgoing PM said he had ?no option? than to maintain the status quo, an option that did not suit Mulroney.

?You had an option, sir. You could have said, ?I'm not going to do it. This is wrong for Canada, and I am not going to ask Canadians to pay the price.' You had an option, sir, to say ?No.?'

Boiled down and paraphrased in the hours and days that followed to ?You could have said ?no,?' the writing that was already clearly on the wall for Turner came into even sharper focus and what followed was more than eight years of government under Mulroney's leadership.

Those definitive moments in debates are fewer and far between these days.

Al Gore's pursuit of George W. Bush around the debate stage was fodder for a few minutes, and fuel for satire, but nobody could really say it came to shift public discourse. The fly that landed on Mike Pence when he faced off against Kamala Harris might have been an omen that inspired countless memes, but there were far more important things to talk about.

In our most recent leaders' debate here in Ontario, Progressive Conservative leader Doug Ford passed up a prime chance to flex some humility when asked about his biggest political regrets and instead answered that his single regret was he did not run for Premier four years earlier. That inspired a bit of chatter over the last week or two, but nothing particularly earth-shattering.

The argument could be made that debates are losing their impact both in terms of an election's outcome and in generating water cooler chatter. Personally, I disagree ? debates are only as good as what the candidates bring to the table, or at least are permitted to do so.

Over the course of this Provincial election campaign, I have had the good democratic fortune to either attend or watch debates in at least four ridings that are up for grabs this time around. The majority of the debates have been held virtually due to lingering uncertainty over the state of the virus, but there have been a few opportunities for candidates to challenge each other face-to-face and for potential voters to be in the room where there is a very unique energy in the air.

Last Thursday, for instance, I attended a debate for the candidates vying to be the next MPP for the riding of Newmarket-Aurora. Hosted by the Newmarket Chamber of Commerce, it was set to be an evening where very different views of Ontario's future were to be presented.

That's not necessarily what happened.

With the Progressive Conservative candidate not in attendance, it was up to the candidates for the NDP, Liberals and Greens to represent Ontario's major parties, as well as the candidate for the New Blues to bring a different perspective to the table.

Without the PCs in attendance, the energy was decidedly low ? in the room, that is; not among the candidates. Despite decidedly different visions for our Provinces, the debate was very collegial and participants agreed more often than not. This, on the surface, sounds like a good thing ? even though, for instance, the vision for Ontario presented by the NDP and the New Blues are decidedly different ? but had the PCs been in the room to both tout and defend their four-year record, the debate would have been something else again.

As such, in my view, the 35 people in attendance at the event, not to mention the 50-odd voters participating virtually, even if they had already decided their vote, were short-changed out of a very important part of the democratic process: getting a full picture of the people who wish to represent them and how they intend to hold the powers-that-be accountable.

This absence is not something unique to the riding of Newmarket-Aurora. The absence of PCs at debates is a trend across the Province. While candidates are still spending a great deal of time knocking on doors and meeting directly with voters ? a vital part of the process, to be sure ? voters deserve the chance to see how those looking to be hired by those at the door state their case amongst challengers, support and defend their record, and, in the case of non-incumbents, defend their platforms.

You might not get those Jack Kennedy moments of yore, but there are few better ways to see how your candidates measure up to each other and how they might serve you.