

What Divides Us Also Unites Us

by SHERALYN ROMAN

I've been doing this for a while now, writing a regular weekly column for this paper and in the past, for several other newspapers and magazines.

Throughout that time, I've received my fair share of comments and feedback. It's always welcome (except for those who threaten or harass ? that's a criminal offense) because to me, it indicates a certain level of common interest in shared discourse on the various topics I've written about. It also means readers are reading and actively engaged which is never a bad thing!

Lately, the amount of feedback I've been receiving, both through the paper and those that reach out using private messaging options, is at an all time high. As a result, I can't help but think that sometimes what divides us is also what unites us as Canadians.

Comments on the ?Freedom Convoy? and reverence for our Canadian flag drew particularly vocal feedback but in true Canadian fashion, most of it was polite. Other than being accused of ?selective outrage,? hardly the worst thing anyone has ever said to me, the most recent interactions with readers have turned into opportunities to engage in exchanges that reflect the passion all sides have for this country we call our own. Frankly, a shared passion for all things Canadian is NOT a bad thing.

Readers and I might agree to disagree on what constitutes ?freedom? in a democracy such as ours but there's no doubt in my mind that we do all believe in democracy. Additionally, most seem to agree that Canada ? compared to so much of the world ? is a pretty good example of a democracy where one is free to live, work and play in peace. (As a side note, Caledon in particular is an especially great place to live, work and play!)

We may not agree on what our flag represents and/or whether or not at the moment we are proudly united behind the flag, or instead, afraid to fly it lest our motivations be questioned. What divides us also seems to unite us, however, as we all agree on this: that the Canadian flag definitely MEANS a great deal to each and every one of us.

To most, it represents freedom and democracy, even if readers and I have a differing view on what that looks like. As one reader recently shared, the weeks-long freedom convoy protest was largely characterized by what they saw as peaceful behaviour and that made them proud to fly our flag. To them, the Ottawa protest DID represent what Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson hoped it would: ?sensitivity, tolerance and compassion towards us all,? citing as this individual did in their email, the number of people they witnessed sharing food, hugging, singing and dancing. I, on the other hand, continue to believe that sensitivity and compassion were in desperately short supply during the Ottawa protests, but perhaps the overall message here is that for any number of disparate reasons, we're each of us still proud of our flag.

What reader feedback means to me more than anything else though, is that in Canada we are united in our understanding that we have the freedom to disagree. In Canada, we have the right to express ourselves ? provided we don't expressly infringe upon the rights of others as we do so. That's the part that still divides us. Could the ?freedom convoy,? for example, have driven to Ottawa and simply lined up their big rigs along only one side of the road, not blocked or harassed mask wearing pedestrians and flown flags without constantly honking horns or shouting, spitting and pushing mainstream media? I believe so. I still might not like their messaging but the methods might have been more tolerable. They may even have won more followers over to their cause.

More than any other feeling I have at the moment however, and given everything that has happened over the last three or four days in Ukraine, I believe it's imperative we shift our focus back to what unites over what divides. Bearing witness to Ukrainian citizens taking up arms to fight for their own democracy in the face of a Russian attack is heartbreaking.

Watching the gathering of peaceful protests and rallies here at home and around the world in support of those Ukrainian citizens is heart-warming, though it's clear we must do more.

If these past few weeks in Canada have shown us anything at all, it's that at our core Canadians know, love and appreciate the principles of democracy. I firmly believe that even if we currently interpret them differently, under the kind of war such as the Ukraine now faces, as Canadians we'd rise together similarly in order to defend our freedom ? becoming as one, united behind our flag. I believe too, that most, if not all of you, will join with me in the common hope for a peaceful end to this dangerous situation before more lives are lost and before any of us might ever be called upon to prove my theory correct.