

Wisdom ? and perspective ? that comes with age

by BROCK WEIR

They were ? and are ? called The Greatest Generation.

Not all that long ago, they were members of our family, maybe a neighbour, a family friend, a fellow community member. Some might still be, but time is not always kind.

I suspect the mantle of 'Greatest Generation' is probably something they wore with a bit of reluctance, but it's not unwarranted. The Greatest Generation, of course, is a term that has been used to describe the demographic that was not only able to weather the storm of the Great Depression but also take up arms for King & Country to preserve our way of life.

While the term was first used in the dying days of the Korean War, it was popularized as the millennium approached when US journalist Tom Brokaw, like so many, was assessing the century that was as we looked ahead to a new one.

While the term may have been worn reluctantly by some of our elder veterans ? perhaps in a similar way that veterans of more recent conflicts often bristle at suggestions they are 'veterans' as it's so often a term associated with our forebears ? it's not without merit.

In recent years, I've often teased a pundit friend of mine over their political prognostications. Of a similar age as me, they grew up in a particularly colourful era of Canadian politics, as far as characters are concerned, and they left a lasting impression. These early impressions sometimes give seasoned and returning politicians a bit of a leg up in their own personal predictions, for better or worse.

As so-called 'elder millennials,' we grew up in what was, in our estimation, a Golden Age when it came to Canadian political satire. Look at what such national institutions as 'This Hour Has 22 Minutes' and 'The Royal Canadian Air Farce' had to work with. We had a positive pantheon of political leaders who either had interesting and varied accents, unique speech rhythms, and homespun sayings that gave humourists plenty to work with.

Still more public figures branded themselves in individual sartorial choices ? from stiletto boots to 'granny' sweaters ? and ways of getting around, like a tandem bicycle? Stockwell Day's jet ski notwithstanding.

And, in these cases, they were more than happy to send up their image because they knew what they stood for, what they represented, and why they were there.

Whether they were effective in their jobs ? well, that was a decision for voters, but whether you agreed with them or not, they were generally accepted as well-meaning stand-up characters who put themselves forward to make a difference. And therein lies the key: character.

Character of this particular generation ? give or take a few years ? were brought into sharp focus for me last week by two very different men for two very different reasons: when world leaders came together to pay tribute to the legacy of US President Jimmy Carter, who died earlier this month at the age of 100, and the bold return of Jean Chretien (admittedly a man who is two to four years younger than the Greatest Generation, according to whoever is the arbiter of such things) to our public discourse.

In the case of President Carter, it was a reminder of what a life well lived can truly accomplish. In the case of the former Prime Minister, it was a matter of using the time still allotted to him to give us a kick in the proverbial pants to stay vigilant, engaged, and be the people our country needs in this challenging time, whether or not we're in positions to lead.

In a show of the elder generation's ability to lay down political differences and instead bond over commonalities, I was struck by the

eulogy for Carter penned by his predecessor Gerald Ford, which was read posthumously by his son at his state funeral.

'According to a map, it's a long way between Grand Rapids, Michigan and Plains, Georgia. But distances have a way of vanishing when measured in values rather than miles, and it was because of our shared values that Jimmy and I respected each other as adversaries even before we cherished one another as dear friends,' wrote Ford. 'Now this is not to say that Jimmy never got under my skin, but has there ever been a group of politicians that didn't do that to one another during our 1976 contest. Jimmy knew my political vulnerabilities, and he successfully pointed them out. Now I didn't like it, but little could I know that the outcome of that 1976 election would bring about one of my deepest and most enduring friendships.'

A few days later, the idea of finding common ground with your political foe, was underscored once again by Chretien, whose open letter to The Globe and Mail, among other outlets, was, he said, a gift to himself for his 91st birthday in response to the US President-Elect's continued rhetoric of making Canada the latest state of the Union.

'I can tell you that Canadians value their independence. We love our country. We have built something here that is the envy of the world'in compassion, in understanding, in tolerance, in finding a way for people of different backgrounds and beliefs to live together in harmony.

We have also built a strong social safety net 'including public health care 'of which we are very proud. It is not perfect, but it is based on the principle that the most vulnerable among us must be protected. This may not be the 'American way' or the 'Trump way.' But it is the reality I have witnessed and experienced throughout my long life.

'The challenge is not to wait in fear for Donald Trump's next move, but to build a country and an international community capable of resisting him. Canadians know me. They know that I am optimistic. That I am practical. And that I always speak my mind. I have made my share of mistakes over the course of my long career, but I have never for a moment doubted the decency of my fellow Canadians'or my political opponents. The current 'and future 'generation of political leaders should remember that they are not each other's enemies, but adversaries. No one has ever enjoyed the harshness of the political arena as much as I have. But I have always understood that each of us is trying to make a positive contribution to making our community and our country a better place. This spirit is more important than ever as we take on this new challenge. They should keep this in mind.'

Indeed, they should.

They've walked the walk, they've played the game, and they've led by example 'informed by their long, long life experiences.

It's time we follow their lead, driven by character, common values, and with common goals.