

Lt. Gov. David Onley strove to 'change the conversation' in Ontario and Aurora



By Brock Weir

As Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, David Onley wanted to spark a discussion when he came to Queen's Park, serving as the Queen's representative in Ontario since 2007.

Having been through polio as a child, he was always a visible and vocal advocate for accessibility during his lengthy career in broadcasting, but when he was first approached in 2006 to let his name stand for consideration as Ontario's next Lieutenant-Governor, he sensed an opportunity to further this personal mandate.

After agreeing to put his name up for consideration, what followed was nearly five months of what Mr. Onley describes as an 'intellectual wrestling match.'

Did he want to give up what he was doing in broadcasting? Would it be a good move for his family? Would he have the physical stamina to do it? These questions aside, however, he felt he had a good handle on the job. Throughout his career, he actively followed the office of Lieutenant-Governor from the time of John Black Aird, but it was one thing to be an observer 'whether professional and casual ' and quite another to be grappling with the reality of taking on the office yourself.

'It was a matter of weighing what I thought might be some of the negatives versus what I really hoped I would achieve if I was appointed,' says Mr. Onley. 'In my letter [to let my name stand] I was very specific in saying it was time for a person with a disability who was otherwise capable of doing the job to hold that position and I was that person.'

'By definition, I was going to be creating an awareness just wherever I went because it would be such a visible visual signal to people, and it certainly has been. I think it has changed the dialogue where at the beginning [of my term] we were talking in terms of accessibility in a physical sense and, in a matter of a couple of years, it transitioned to a whole process for employment for people with disabilities because unemployment levels are so catastrophically higher than it is for the general population.'

Mr. Onley says he hopes to have many opportunities to continue this dialogue, once his term wraps up and Elizabeth Dowdeswell assumes the role of Lieutenant-Governor on September 23. Queen's Park recently brought out the old desk once used by Pauline McGibbon, Ontario's first female Lieutenant-Governor, for Ms. Dowdeswell to get a handle on the job and receive some tips from Mr. Onley, in what he describes with a laugh as 'Lieutenant-Governor's Summer School.'



Lt. Gov. David Onley with his official portrait, depicting His Honour in the mess kit of the Queen's York Rangers. Auroran photos by Brock Weir

After his term wraps up this month, he looks forward to taking on a new challenge as an ambassador for the University of Toronto, as well as taking up a post teaching political science at the U of T's Scarborough Campus, where he himself got his own start. Nevertheless, new items are continually being added to his to-do list.

Next Tuesday, for instance, he will take on the role of Honourary Patron of Canadian Business SenseAbility, a new private sector advocacy group made up of companies that put an emphasis on hiring persons with disabilities, to advocate fellow private sector businesses, and governments, to take advantage of what is a vastly untapped employee pool.

In selecting his personal mandate of increasing awareness of accessibility challenges in Ontario, improving the job prospects of those individuals living with disabilities, as well as continuing the successful campaign of his predecessor, James Bartleman, focusing on literacy in Aboriginal communities, Mr. Onley had to strike the right balance between these goals and his primary duty in representing the Queen.

He was emboldened in his efforts, he says, by the fact the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) was unanimously passed by the Ontario Legislature, removing any perception he was taking on a political role in what is officially an apolitical office.

‘‘I thought the levels of protocol were about 18 inches deep, but within a matter of days, I realised they were about 18 feet deep,’’ says Mr. Onley of his perception of what the office was, versus the reality of when he was actually installed. ‘‘It was somewhat overwhelming when you just realise how many protocol factors were at work determining where you could speak, who you could speak to, what you could speak about, how you had to remain apolitical. As a former reporter and political science student, I was used to making comments about political matters and had to suddenly stop that.’’

As he got deeper into his role, Mr. Onley says he saw some people in Ontario had some misconceptions ‘‘to a certain extent’’ about the role of the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, misconceptions he has tried to address head-on in making an effort to ‘‘enhance the relevance’’ of the office both to the community and to the ‘‘culture of Ontario.’’

To this end, one of the things Mr. Onley says he is most proud of is strengthening the ties between his office and Aurora's regiment, the Queen's York Rangers. When he took office, Mr. Onley, a student of history, says he made an effort to learn even more about his predecessors and, in particular, John Graves Simcoe, the very first Lieutenant-Governor. After the forebears of the present regiment scattered after the American Revolution, it was Simcoe, he says, that reconstituted the regiment and brought them back to Upper Canada to, ‘‘in effect, act as his staff.’’

He was approached by pollsters John Wright and Darrell Bricker, both of whom have deep ties to the Regiment, who asked him to serve as Honourary Patron.

‘‘I said I wanted to do something bigger than that, and that was to have the Regiment formally re-affiliated with the office of the Lieutenant-Governor to take it right back to its historic roots,’’ he explains. ‘‘After several months of discussions with the Federal Government we ended up doing just that. General Natynczyk and Defence Minister Peter MacKay signed off on a special order that recreated the relationship between the office and the Queen's York Rangers in perpetuity and it becomes only the second regiment in Canada, next to the Governor General's Horse Guards, to be formally associated with a viceregal office. When that was done in September 2011, it was a very happy and proud moment and I have been to Aurora a number of times in relation to the Rangers activities. I am proud of that affiliation and look very, very much to continuing my involvement.’’

The importance Mr. Onley holds in this restored connection is evidenced nowhere better than in his recently unveiled official portrait, in which he is wearing the QYR's mess kit. It is ‘‘quite a feeling’’ to put on that uniform, he says, and it will be particularly meaningful on September 23 when he hands Simcoe's sword over to Ms. Dowdeswell.

‘‘It is something you can't fully appreciate until you are in the midst of it and realise that you truly are a part of a continuum of history.’’

Bringing the role to the community is fairly straightforward, he says, but enhancing the importance of the role to culture was a different challenge altogether. He and his wife, Ruth Ann, strove to become involved ‘‘with communities and groups that either weren't involved at all, or involved marginally.’’

‘‘We did that so we could minimize the impression by some, but not many, that this is somehow an aloof office that is somehow separate from what every day people are concerned about,’’ says Mr. Onley. ‘‘Far from it. We have tried to be [as] involved as we

can in a whole range of areas.

?I hope [historians] will say I have helped enhance the office, I hope they say I have helped change the conversation or dialogue about people with disabilities from one of just physical access to the important civil right of being able to reasonably aspire to a meaningful job or career,? says Mr. Onley. ?It has been truly an honour and privilege to have this position.?