

BROCK'S BANTER: Critical care for "critical thought"

By Brock Weir

It's not a new concept.

From the dawn of our school system, educators have been looking for ways to drive home a very simple concept: that we need to think to get ahead.

In days of yore, it is a concept that only went so far. After all, if you were given too free a rein to think for yourself, you might step over some sort of invisible line and begin to re-think or, horror of horrors, question established principles.

Deviating from what was considered 'the norm' was considered, well, deviant behaviour, even if 'the norm' at that time was saturated in outright prejudice, sexism and racism or, at the very least, still running on lingering fumes left over from the 'isms' once they began to get eradicated from our system.

Thankfully, we now live in an era where these 'norms' not as valued as they once were and exploration of truth, and all that comes with it, is very much celebrated and encouraged.

We - and particularly younger people - are nudged to question, forge their own path, and lay the foundations of charting uncharted territory. It has led, in my view, to a generation that is stronger than ever, looking at the world with a new kind of social consciousness, and re-energized to bring about the change we want to see in the world.

As positive as all this sounds, however, there are also drawbacks.

In addition to being relatively 'free range' when it comes to finding our own answers there are today more avenues than ever before to seek them out.

We have newspapers, radio, and television, the big three media that have informed generations of Canadians. But needless to say - but, what the hell, I'll do so anyway - there is standard ole' internet, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and myriad other means to become informed.

For better or worse.

Looking back over my time as a youth, things seem so quaint by comparison.

Last week, while attending an all-candidates' debate in Newmarket - well, it was billed as an all-candidates' meeting, but only two candidates bothered to show up and answer questions - I had a flashback to Grade 8, sitting in our school library, waiting for the boom to fall.

It was April 1. Yes, you can probably figure out where this is going.

The day before, we were informed by our teacher that we would essentially be the guinea pigs for a new standardized test the Harris government was thinking about rolling out in the school year ahead.

We all rolled our eyes and pointed out the following day was April Fool's Day and we weren't buying it, but the teacher insisted that was just how the chips fell and it was not an April Fool's prank.

We bought it. We shouldn't have. The next day we were in the Library, we got our research question, and we all made a dash to our bank of World Book encyclopedias to suss out the information we needed - all before the teacher, 30 minutes later, announced what we believed to be true the day before, that it was indeed an April Fool's Joke.

The instance that inspired this flashback was an all-candidates meeting hosted by KAIROS, an ecumenical group founded by 10 churches and religious organizations with a double-barrelled mandate to advocate for ecological justice and human rights.

At this particular meeting, Newmarket-Aurora candidates Chris Ballard (Liberal) and Melissa Williams (NDP) were fielding the questions.

They were the standard fare questions from audience members who seemed, from my perspective, to generally skew to the left of centre. But, then a question from left field came out into the open.

'This is a low-profile issue,' said Doug, the man holding the microphone, 'but I think it is critical: that is, critical thinking. It seems to me that in every walk of life, too low a percentage of the population applies critical thinking. Is it true what I've read or seen? How would I know whether it is true? Is the story complete? My question is: is there a way to bring critical thinking into certain secondary schools, but even elementary schools? [I'm not talking about a] separate program, but pervading everything so that in every class it is inherent: here are things that are said - What's true or not? How do you know it?'

It is a question both candidates handled with very thoughtful responses.

'People are concerned that we're waiting too late to be able to introduce our children to ways of critical thinking,' said Ms.

Williams, noting a concern that by the time kids reach high school ideas are already 'engrained' in them.

Added Mr. Ballard: ?I have seen some really good examples of teachers who are incorporating critical thinking into elementary school and secondary school? Maybe I am a little more optimistic. I always get worried that people stick to one news source, or they stick to [social media] as their source of news.?

In my view, however, kids are getting a bit of a bad rap.

Older folks might be concerned that the youth of today might be experiencing a deficit of critical thinking skills, but I think this is a problem that is being experienced across the broad spectrum of ages.

One only has to look as far as the ongoing Provincial election to see prime examples of this.

Parties are courting voters 18+ and, in many cases, it seems that minds are generally made up.

Despite the NDP surge late last week, a surge which is still going at the time of this writing, but a day is a long time in this particular political atmosphere, it seems that people, whoever they are leaning towards are voting against something rather than for something. Many people are looking to throw their vote to the PCs or NDP simply as a vote against Liberal leader Kathleen Wynne and barely scratching the surface of a platform.

Others are looking to the PC party because they don't like Kathleen Wynne and the idea of throwing their vote behind an orange wave gives them palpitations as they recall the party's negatives from a quarter-century ago, platform be damned.

Still more are supporting the PC party because their slogans, buzzwords and pitches over what they are not rather than what they are, are seemingly easier for some voters to digest ? lack of a comprehensive platform, a platform outside of campaign trail announcements, be damned.

This is a critical election, all parties agree, but critical thinking seems to be a distant memory.

With one week before the polls open, will critical thinking kick back in once again with voters casting their ballot for some something rather than against something?

Let's hope so.