

BROCK'S BANTER: Ears to the Ground

By Brock Weir

My paternal instincts come and go.

On a particularly sunny Sunday this past weekend, I had the chance to just sit back and relax by the water and indulge in some people-watching.

As someone who is employed to observe and report, for lack of a better phrase, the sheer variety of people that call southern Ontario home never fails to fascinate.

People were out walking their dogs; dogs of all shapes and sizes, accompanied by owners of the same.

Some boomers were enjoying a Sunday outing with their elderly parents, taking in some golden moments in some golden light.

Others, keen to enjoy the weather but not necessarily interact with their fellow man or woman, were basking in what nature conjured up, casually but firmly plugged into their earbuds to drown out the din of humanity.

Others were out with their kids, some pushing strollers, keen to soak in one of the very first near-perfect days of our long-delayed spring.

One such kid was watched by his smiling parents as he walked a dog several times larger than himself.

Another couple was out with their toddler daughter who was still taking her first tentative steps.

As she walked towards the water closely followed by her parents, she had her right arm stretched out and dangling from her wrist was a black and white soccer-themed bracelet. It was clear that despite their best efforts, even at this early stage, that the girl was probably not going to be Canada's next soccer superstar as she marched towards the water, right arm outstretched, purposefully ? that purpose being to toss that plastic bangle into the drink, apparently so she could continue living her best life off the field.

Those scenes sometimes make my own biological clock tick a bit faster; then again, it grinds to a halt when the reverie is pierced by an eardrum-shattering screech from another nearby child. Or two. Or three. An entire gaggle of kids who, despite pleas from their parents or caregivers continue on their merry way, content with challenging any

and all boundaries set before them.

With each plea, a new line is set, new goal posts are planted, and, faced with a new challenge, the kids are all too content to step right up to that line and gingerly place their big toe on the other side just to see what happens.

Almost each and every instance is another tap on the biological clock's snooze button and we're back to square one.

The problem is these instances are coming all too frequently and from all too many directions these days.

And it is not just limited to kids.

Whatever the factor, we appear to be living in a climate where walking right up to the line, putting that big toe in, taking it out, putting it back in again for good measure and shaking it all about is becoming a rule rather than an exception.

Asking for permission before having any cause to ask for forgiveness used to be the standard, but not anymore.

Take, for instance, the ongoing furore in Alabama regarding their new abortion laws which will see a near-total ban on the procedure, even in cases of rape and incest. It is an unconscionable move for the obvious reasons. It rejects and rolls back reproductive and basic human rights that were hard-fought by previous generations, and sets the stage for a looming larger battle that will see just how far special interest groups can push back against basic human rights for all in favour of the interests of a few.

From a wider perspective, at the Federal level in Washington, the country is facing an executive quagmire at the top that seems to be wagging its toe over just about every line it can find with increasing regularity, damn the consequences.

Regardless of your opinion of the individual holding the office of President of the United States at this or any other time, just a few short years ago there were some standards one could count on; standards that, although relatively informal, were the benchmark of presidential behaviour and dignity for the office. When those standards were seen to be breached, whether it was the Watergate scandal or the Lewinsky affair, individuals elected to be the public's checks and balances on the executive were deployed for the sake of the collective standards in which members of the public held that office.

Now, nearly two-and-a-half centuries' worth of those standards have been tossed aside rather unceremoniously as lawmakers continue to move the proverbial goalposts to suit their own agendas.

We're not immune to this here at home.

In Ottawa, for instance, we have ongoing questions and controversy on whether the Prime Minister has attempted to move the accepted goalposts when it comes to the independence of our judiciary and, closer to home, at Queen's Park, we have a Premier who seems keen on poking many of the institutions we hold dear, like public health care, to see just where those limits are.

When those limits are reflected in public opinion polls, however, backtracking begins and these instances of backtracking are reframed as a gesture of good faith in the people of this Province ? like Monday's announcement the Provincial Government was backing down on a number of retroactive cuts to municipal funding, including dollars allocated for emergency services, public health and child care.

Each of the proposed cuts sparked a furious and immediate backlash from lower tiers of government and members of the public alike.

'We're a government that listens,' said the Premier on Monday, noting that future cuts were still on the agenda but immediate cuts were now off the table.

It is indeed true. In many cases, this is a government that listens, but it seems that these ears prick up only when there is a potential hit at the polls.

If governments adhered to the old norms of consulting and listening to the public to find out where the line is before they stepped over it, everyone would be in a much better position.

Where those lines currently lie, however, anywhere around the world, is anyone's guess.