

BROCK'S BANTER: On the right side of history

By Brock Weir

It never ceases to surprise me.

In this line of work, day in and day out, you ask questions, often of complete strangers.

There are questions you know not to ask; that is, questions that invariably open the door to one syllable answers. There are the questions that always help people probe deeper into themselves and express their thoughts on a more fulsome scale. Then again, depending on the nature of the interview or interviewee in question, there are also questions that are best left for another time and place.

So, being on the receiving end of questions in an interview setting is something that always takes me aback. It is not that I'm necessarily uncomfortable being asked questions, but something inside me clams up. I'm invariably tongue-tied and become increasingly exasperated with myself waiting for my mouth to catch up with the thoughts running through my head.

It's maddening, so it has given me a certain degree of sympathy to those I have to interview each week. In some cases, the subjects come right out and say that it is the first time they have been interviewed, and their eyes widen somewhat as soon as they see the voice recorder come out of my pocket ready to go. Others, people who are quite seasoned with the interview process, never become one hundred per cent accustomed to it, and still blanch at the sight of the little prism-like object that's ready to capture every word they say.

Last Friday, I was conducting an interview with two individuals in the community. The interview itself went quite well, in my opinion, and will be featured in future pages in this newspaper, but, near the end, the tables were turned.

'So,' the male of the interviewed duo said, 'how do you pick and choose what to cover?'

After taking a moment to gauge whether or not this was snark or a genuine question (spoiler: it was the latter) I was relieved to find that I didn't clam up. I actually had the answer ready to go.

The answer was simple, but twofold. Obviously the most newsworthy items of the week go into the paper, but when it comes to issues that some people might find more mundane than human interest stories, such as a Council meeting where on occasion up to twenty disparate issues get tackled in a relatively short window of time, there is a different approach altogether.

Back in my university days, in addition to journalism, my secondary area of study was Canadian Social History. As such, a lot of my work focused on learning the backstory of some of the more commonplace items, events and traditions in our lives. Time was spent going through back issues of local and national newspapers sussing out their respective origin stories: who were the decision-makers? Who were the naysayers? What influenced their respective decisions 50, 100, or 150 years ago?

This is often the approach I take. I try to imagine what the people of this community a half, full, or century-and-a-half might come back to in order to learn more about the age-old decisions that were made that still impact their lives in some way, be it a development issue, an infrastructure program, or a simple grant that led to then-untold but enduring benefits to society.

Part of this research, of course, is determining who fell on the right side or wrong side of history and how that was determined over the course of time.

My answer to the gentleman who posed the original question, luckily enough, top of mind on Friday as just two days before I was watching a BBC documentary on YouTube that was released to mark the 70th birthday of the Prince of Wales on November 14. Entitled, 'Prince, Son and Heir: Charles at 70,' it explored these three facets of a man that is known very well to us not only as the Prince of Wales, but the future King of Canada. Each of these roles was examined separately, unveiling almost a framework of how Prince Charles might operate when he becomes monarch.

A great deal of the focus was placed on whether or not he would remain a social activist as our Head of State and the Head of State of 15 other nations throughout the Commonwealth. The gist of his answer was an unequivocal 'no' before he outlined what he sees as the duties of the monarch. And yet, I couldn't help but feel a little bit sad that his activism will ultimately become a thing of the past because, in my opinion, he is one of those leaders who will ultimately be found on the right side of history when all is said and done.

'I always wonder what meddling is,' said the Prince with a twinkle when his interviewer left the statement 'People have accused you of meddling' hanging in the air.

'I always thought it was motivating,' he continued. 'I have always been intrigued if it is meddling to worry about the inner cities as I did 40 years ago, and what was happening or not happening there, the conditions in which people were living. If that is meddling, I am very proud of it.'

We too should be proud of his meddling. Here in Canada, his Prince's Trust Canada has focused on providing entrepreneurship opportunities to members of the Canadian Armed Forces, laying the groundwork for employment programs for young people, and supporting indigenous communities protect and revitalize their own languages.

40 years ago, as demonstrated with a clip of one of the Prince's speeches, as watched by his sons William and Harry, in which he rails against huge plastic consumption and the devastating impacts it will have on our environment, he was tut-tutted for being out of touch and maybe a little bit daffy. Yet, time has proven him right.

Although he is now past the age where many people of his generation have retired, he is showing no signs of letting up in his efforts to make a difference.

'We're running out of time because the necessary action hasn't been taken,' he said, visiting a section of the decaying Great Barrier Reef. 'That's the problem. I can't believe that people can simply pay no attention to science. They accept it in any other aspect of modern existence - the evidence - but apparently not for climate change.'

'In those days [of founding the Prince's Trust first in the United Kingdom in the 1970s], the Home Office didn't think it was at all a good idea, so it was quite difficult to get it off the ground. I kept saying I want to be able to take risks. If it didn't work, it was worth trying with the most difficult ones, the ones you find hardest to reach in society.'

These 'risks' have seen significant dividends thanks to perseverance and boldness. It is a lesson that each of us - particularly our leaders - can take to heart. In fact, it is needed, and sometimes lacking, in our leaders.