

BROCK'S BANTER: People of Convenience

By Brock Weir

I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm finding myself more and more frequently looking in the rear view mirror the less and less I actually happen to be on the road.

With each passing day, I wonder with greater frequency whether I got off the road at the wrong exit. If it's not wondering whether I got off on the right exit, it's pondering if I got distracted somewhere along the way and the exit I was supposed to hit was a few kilometres back and I was bound for a destination unknown.

The former typically wins out over the latter and each day seems stranger, more foreign, and perhaps even more bewildering than the last.

Although we're probably more than tired of hearing about it at this point, consider the goings-on south of our border, where each hour seems to bring a new twist that was stranger than the last turn. Our accepted line between what is considered 'normal' and that vague area of 'abnormal' is continually redrawn further and further away, what was once inconceivable is now just your typical, run of the mill Thursday, and what can be found by turning on any outlet from CNN to FOX News at any given moment is stranger and more ludicrous than anything Aaron Sorkin or the creators of House of Cards ever dared dream.

Yet, it's the reality we're living in now and it is likely to get worse before it gets better. The most alarming part is, it is going to continue to get weirder than what was once, just a few years before, beyond the limits of our collective imagination.

It's a world where the so-called Leader of the Free World, so anointed by the people of the country he now leads, tells the same people that they shouldn't bother to believe, or even consider, what they see with their own eyes or hear with their own ears, and only what comes out of his mouth, or the tweets from his fingertips as the approved gospel.

It's a world where governments purporting to be for the populace often prefer their people to surrender their powers of critical thinking to be led blindly to their final destination, and they are doing so willingly.

And yet, those who are doing so still cling to the belief that they are being heard, their needs are being met and they, the little guy, are still ultimately wielding the keys to power.

Thankfully, here in Ontario, things have not quite hit the skids, but all too many people were on high alert last Thursday when word began to leak from Queen's Park that Premier Ford was poised to not only halve the admittedly unwieldy size of Toronto's municipal Council, but also unilaterally cancel the votes for the position of Chair in the Regions of York and Peel.

This fall's Municipal Election, up until that point, seemed to be a relatively sedate affair.

There seemed no real rush from candidates to file their names in the attempt to storm the halls of power with their own visions for the municipality.

Many of those who already hold some sway in the power department - Mayor and Councillors - formally put in their paperwork and paid the requisite fees in order to be re-hired by the people, but others, some names as expected, jumped into the fray for the first time, looking for their opportunity to make a difference and their chance to help shape their communities.

All seemed to be shaping up as expected, but, having a gut feeling there might be an unexpected twist in the municipal saga, some of us camped out at Town Hall to see just what it might be.

I guess that gut feeling must have been something we ate, or at least a bad case of gas, and no twists ultimately transpired, but there was no shortage of things to talk about thanks to the Premier's decision.

That bombshell revelation gave plenty of fodder, ranging from speculation on the Premier's motives for doing such a thing, whether or not it was simply a move to spite his Progressive Conservative predecessor Patrick Brown, who was then in the running for Regional Chair of Peel, the practicality (or lack thereof) of pruning the size of Toronto Council, and the in-real-time developments of Mr. Brown subsequently filing his papers to run for Mayor of Brampton and the whiplash of incumbent (and appointed) York Region Chair Wayne Emerson announcing Thursday he would not seek election to the Region's top job, only to change his mind and file his papers in the wake of the Premier's announcement.

A suddenly exciting election? Absolutely. But worrying? Sadly, yes.

The newly elected Progressive Conservative Provincial Government likes to paint itself to be a 'government for the people.'

There have been a few glimmers of this in the lead up to - and weeks following - the election where the Premier-to-be reversed his position on opening up the Greenbelt to development after extreme backlash from the people - backlash, in this case, dubbed 'consultation with the people of Ontario.' Most recently, the government made a pivot on redrafting the health and sex-ed curriculum after heated public feedback.

And yet, this very important decision on how Ontarians are governed was made unilaterally.

It is concerning to me that a government that claims to be 'government for the people' will not give the people a say in how they are governed. When push comes to shove, Torontonians might believe they would be better served by a streamlined Council. Aurora certainly thought so when they voted to shrink Council by two members in the 2014 referendum. But Aurorans were afforded the chance to have their say.

Citizens were also given the chance to speak out on whether they wanted the heads of their Regional Councils to be elected positions. Some Regional Councillors - including Mayors - in each area had their misgivings about opening the position up to the general public, and, in many cases, voted against it, the public was very much of the position that they wanted to have a say in who would lead the way.

This was born out in many ways, ranging from unscientific online polls, to debates in lower tier Council chambers, to extensive public consultation and hearings undertaken by the Previous Provincial Government.

And yet, the very change that the people wanted, has been snatched away.

If the new Provincial Government wants to live up to its promise of being a 'Government for the People,' the first step is to listen to those people and serve those interests. By choosing that moniker, they have set a high bar and now they have to deliver. If not, we might be on a slippery slope, and we now know some of the things that could be at the bottom of that hill.