

BROCK'S BANTER: The Lost Art of Common Sense

By Brock Weir

It always raised my eyebrows.

In the race to replace Tim Hudak as Leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, Aurora welcomed a steady stream of contenders wanting to take the helm, everyone from Christine Elliott to Vic Fideli.

Whenever they showed up in Aurora ? almost invariably at Aw, Shucks! ? a pretty set pattern invariably unfolded.

The candidate in question would show up, shake hands for a bit, be introduced to the crowds by a member of the local riding association, and then get up to speak. Similarly, this usually followed another set pattern: a localized joke, followed by a dig at Kathleen Wynne, a remark throwing (as the kids say today) shade at Chris Ballard, paying homage to former MPP Frank Klees, who almost always made an ?unexpected? appearance to show his support for the party, and then, of course, a reflection of days gone by. And, it was always the glory days ? glory, in the eyes of the candidates, seeming to focus on the days of Mike Harris who swept into power under the momentum of the so-called ?Common Sense Revolution.?

It was a bold approach, one which got him comfortably into majority territory.

Ah, yes, the good old days each leadership candidate promised to restore to the party, following on the tenets of Mr. Harris' policies and the wondrous impact he had on the Province of Ontario.

What never seemed to enter into the conversation was the aftershocks of the ?Common Sense Revolution? is, in large part, what swept Harris' successor Ernie Eves out of the top job, thus paving the way for Dalton McGuinty, Kathleen Wynne and, so far, nearly 15 years of continuous Liberal rule.

Of course, each candidate was preaching to the converted, a room which practically bled blue, but the sheer lack of introspection on lessons learned over the course of being in opposition, aside from agreeing that Tim Hudak was a disaster on all fronts, caused my right eyebrow to hit new heights.

Nevertheless, I do agree with one aspect of this reflection of former glory. There is a need to return to days of common sense ? that is, common sense in the most common form, and not common sense in the partisan sense of the phrase.

Common sense, of course, means different things to different people. So too does the phrase ?common.? I recall back in the early 1990s, the short window of time between Nelson Mandela being released from prison and being elected President of South Africa, a speech he made to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

It was ironic, he mused, that the Commonwealth was a body of nations in which, for the majority, ?wealth was not so common.?

Well, Canada is the largest nation in that particular ?Commonwealth of? and rapidly we're becoming a nation where sense is equally uncommon.

To pick but one example from last summer when two kids from the Ottawa area were ticketed for running a curbside lemonade stand without a proper license from the City. Those eyebrows raised once again, as did brows from across the country, on the simple lack of both common sense and perspective.

Ottawa, however, is far from unique and we have had several examples very close to home.

One instance was narrowly avoided last week following a push from Councillor Abel regarding a violin concert an eight-year-old local girl, Sofia, wanted to put on at Town Park this past Saturday for a friend, Emma, who has been battling cancer.

The previous Saturday I had met up with Sofia who, accompanied by her parents, was wandering through the Farmers' Market playing her violin to raise awareness for her upcoming fundraising efforts.

Her parents shared with me their dismay at having to pay a rather large sum of money to be able to plug in their speakers at the Town Park band shell, conceding they might have to go with their plan B or rumbling generators to make sure those coming out to support Emma could hear the music they hoped to make.

It seems when the previous Council allowed staff to charge an hourly rate for the use of the Town Park band shell for the fee of \$60, rather than renting it out for the full-day rate of \$340, it was not spelled out that the \$60 rate included the use of power, as most might think.

So, when Sofia's family applied to use the band shell, they were told that they could certainly book it at the hourly rate but if they wanted to plug anything in they would have to pay full freight for the whole day because a member of staff would need to be on hand to flip the switch on and off.

?To my mind it is perhaps a matter of discretion or interpretation,? said Councillor Abel on the fact that electricity was not explicitly stated in the most recent fee guide. ?Three or four years later we find out that there is something binding that if you interpret it or are

going to use some discretion you have to fall back and pay \$325. We have actually gone backwards. I think it should be automatically assumed that when they come for an hourly rate they get a plug because that is what music is all about.?

Councillor Mrakas was of a similar mindset, wondering whether an extension cord could simply be run from the band shell to allow the little girl to amp up her concert without the use of a loud generator, as power was being drawn from the band shell to the Farmers' Market which was set to wrap up just an hour before the concert, would do the trick.

It wouldn't, said Parks and Rec Director Al Downey because staff would still need to attend.

?We were trying our very best to offer some options to this particular resident because we do not have, as staff, discretion to waive the fee bylaw,? he said.

But those options were, apparently, limited to pay the hourly rate without power and go unplugged, wheel in your own generator, or pay for the full day with electricity ? not exactly a cornucopia of possibilities.

Although Saturday's torrential downpours sadly made fast work of young Sofia's concert, common sense in situations like these should really win the day.

Is it fair for an eight year old girl, just starting to hone her love and talent for music, and harnessing it to do a world of good for a friend to have her application evaluated in the same way as a profit-making enterprise or a professional musician?

Probably not.

Is it likely that Council's decision to allow use of the band shell at a discounted hourly rate was made conscious of the fact renting it without power was even a remote possibility?

Probably not.

Taxpayers obviously shouldn't have to take a hit for the use of staff time in a case like this, hence the fees, but those elusive grains of common sense should always be brought into the fore, even if only to avoid discouraging budding philanthropists from acting on their instincts.