

FRANKLY SPEAKING: Civility

What happened to Civility & Ethics?

By Frank Klees, MPP

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Toronto's Mayor, still reeling from the previous week's revelations about his questionable encounters with criminal elements, admits to smoking crack cocaine.

The vultures circle and an unseemly spectacle unfolds that is reminiscent of the ancient bloody gladiatorial games.

Former friends and allies could be seen jockeying for position, even while it was evident that at centre stage was a desperate, wounded man. That those wounds were self-inflicted is not the issue. At issue is the lack of civility and the overriding self-interest that was on display for all to see.

The feeding frenzy by the media was disturbing to watch. The insatiable public hunger for the details of this unfolding tragedy was unnerving. The gloating by political foes was offensive.

Playing out in Canada's Senate, the 'place of sober second thought' so termed by our first Prime Minister, was a similar tragedy play. Centre stage was the historic turfing of three senators by their colleagues for inappropriate expense claims.

Despite an appeal for due democratic process by many, including Conservative Senator Hugh Segal, the three were banished and would serve as sacrificial lambs for the redemption of many whose own conduct may be in need of a similar cleansing.

As troubled as I was over what I was observing in those two political arenas, even more disturbing was the callous lack of civility that played out on the floor of our own legislature over the course of that same week.

Health Minister Refuses to Approve Life-saving Drug

Following the typical ebb and flow between party leaders and the Premier during Question Period, my colleague MPP Ted Chudleigh made this impassioned plea to Health Minister Deb Mathews on behalf of his constituent:

'Minister, five days ago you joined this assembly in a standing ovation for Kimm Fletcher, a mother of two with brain cancer. Later, in a private meeting, you promised to review her file to investigate why she's being denied OHIP coverage for the drug Avastin, a drug she so desperately needs.....I ask if the minister has in fact reviewed the file.'

What followed was a low point in my eighteen years in the Legislature.

As you read the minister's response, keep in mind that two Premiers - Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne admitted in sworn testimony that the decision to cancel two gas plants at a cost of more than a billion dollars was strictly a 'political decision' to save Liberal seats.

'I think it's very important that everyone in this House acknowledges that we do have a protocol in place, a protocol that removes political interference from decisions around what drugs are funded and for whom.'

My colleagues and I were stunned by this callous response. Yes, there are protocols, but there are also extenuating circumstances that call for intervention. If there was ever a time for a minister to intervene, this was it.

A mother of two young children, who according to doctors would not see Christmas without the benefit of this drug, and the best the minister can do is to recite a briefing note about protocol.

For the next four days, my colleague continued to press the minister on this issue, citing the fact that other provinces cover the cost of the drug for patients under similar circumstances.

In desperation, the appeal was directed to the Premier. Here is the Kathleen Wynne's response:

'There is nothing more important than being able to save people's lives and to have the health care system work. But part of that is taking the politics out of these kinds of decisions.'

Taking the politics out of these kinds of decisions?

So, in the Premier's universe, she can justify making a 'political decision' if it will save seats for the Liberal party, but when it comes to approving a drug that would extend a life, politics should be taken out of that decision.

I will make an admission here. In the eighteen years that I have had the privilege of serving as an MPP, some of the most gratifying experiences I can recall were made possible when I was able to exercise my influence as an MPP for the benefit of constituents.

Often, that meant that existing protocol had to be over-ruled, whether that involved facilitating access to a hospital or long term care bed, a cancer drug, MRI or an emergency airlift back to Ontario.

I make no apologies for exercising that influence in the public interest.

The Minister of Health has the authority to make a life-extending drug available to Kimm Fletcher. Not only does she have the authority, I believe she has a moral and ethical obligation to do so.

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