

The limits of democracy



By Nate Smelle

It is that time of year when the break of dawn arrives well before 6 a.m. Stepping onto the front porch last Friday morning my ears quickly settled into the smooth song being sung by a pair of robins from the tallest white spruce in the forest. A ruffed grouse was drumming from the forest floor as a white-tailed deer quietly slipped into the shadows.

From the scrap wood pile at the bottom of the hill, I could hear the sound of a porcupine gnawing on the soggy bones of a retired coffee table. Approaching from the south, a flock of Canadian geese announced its presence.

It was Earth Day, and right on schedule, all of life was welcoming its annual awakening. One cannot walk through a forest in the spring and not feel a sense of what some call ?déjà vu.? This is true in any season, however, our senses are especially hungry for the return of spring's seasonal blanket of warmth and colour after a long, cold winter.

Paying attention to nature and the signs it provides, one does not need a crystal ball to predict what the near future holds. To our advantage, by acknowledging the patterns and trends produced by the natural cycles in which we are inextricably involved, we gain insight into what can be expected to happen under certain environmental conditions.

Likewise, because politics is a human construct arising from these natural cycles, insight into the consequences of certain political decisions can also be predicted with a relatively high degree of accuracy. Anyone who follows politics knows this to be true. They also know that the best time to identify political patterns is during an election.

Tuning into any news report from now until the provincial election on June 2, we can expect to be confronted with a wave of promises from each of the parties and their candidates. In most cases the candidates will tow the party line, and get behind their leader.

While pointing a finger at former Liberal premier Kathleen Wynne, Conservative candidates will promise to rebuild a "failing" economy that they will tell us is in no way tied to their leadership under the current Ford government. Putting the blame for Ontario's shortcomings on former Conservative premier Mike Harris, Liberals will avoid any mention of the fact that they followed through with most of the Conservatives' agenda under Harris, including the privatization of hydro. With one finger waving at the Conservatives and another at the Liberals, New Democrats will promise almost everything needed to make Ontario a truly equitable and inclusive province; knowing deep down that the best possible outcome for the party is to form the official opposition.

For any hopeful gambler wishing to place a bet on the upcoming election, this is valuable information that can be used to bolster one's bottom line. In a more tragic and significant way, our awareness of this predictability in politics is a telling indicator of the limits of democracy.

This is why supporters of such parties as the newly established Ontario Party, or the New Democratic Party of Ontario must settle for the role of Conservative/Liberal kingmakers. It has become clear over the past several decades, that Canadians have lost the courage to vote for what they truly believe in. Instead we repeatedly and sheepishly opt for reelecting one of the lesser of two evils. In doing so, we neglect our potential to change things for the better, in favour of embracing the evil of two lessers.

What is it about this political pattern that has voters so afraid of trying a different style of government? Are we so happy with the direction our governments have been taking this province, and our country over the past few decades that we don't want or need change? Or, have we become too petrified with fear of the inevitable evolution of consciousness that will come with breaking free from the chains that bind us to drastically outdated status quo?

Half a century or so before Canada officially became a country, French philosopher Joseph de Maistre helped to define the limits of democracy when he acknowledged that "Every nation gets the government it deserves."

Since then, as a species, we have repeatedly demonstrated that we, more than any other living thing on the planet, are lost without a collective of our best minds to guide us through the chaos we manufacture.

As the story of the 2022 provincial election in Ontario unfolds, it would serve us well moving forward to pay attention to the patterns we perpetuate through our political engagement. We also need to honestly answer the question: when was the last time we elected a government that we can definitively say served the best interests of the majority of Ontarians, and Canadians? Have we ever?

Most importantly, before we mark an "x" beside the name of our preferred candidate, we need to take a hard look at their intentions. We then must ask ourselves whether this candidate is among the collective of great minds aspiring to lead us into the future; or, have they entered the race with the intention of personally capitalizing on the inequities and dysfunction of the existing status quo?

These are a few questions I will need answered before marking my "x" on June 2. Although it may be a bit early to throw my money down on which candidates will cross the finish line first, I am ready and willing to bet it all on de Maistre's observation of democracy holding true once again.