

A time to question



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By Nate Smelle

Lounging on the balcony of my hotel room in Addis Ababa, reading the local newspaper, listening to the sound of howling dogs and a news report screaming out from the TV set inside that the Amazon rainforest is being reduced to smoke and ash. One of my first missions on every trip always being to pick up a local paper, my attention had already been focused on the topic of trees. Thanks to *'Green Initiative Takes Flight,'* an article in *The Reporter* by Samuel Getachew, prior to hearing this news of the fiery carnage down south I had been smiling, thinking of how much of a difference we could make if every country followed Ethiopia's lead when it comes to tree planting. While walking and touring the city using various means of public transit I noticed that nearly every unoccupied patch of dirt, whether it was in a park, traffic circle, median or under a bridge was home to a freshly planted tree. Imagining the ingenuity and level of cooperation required to pull off such a loving transformation of the urban landscape in Addis Ababa alone, I marveled at the grandiose scale of this national environmental campaign. There is good reason for the Ethiopian government to celebrate and take pride in its nationwide greening initiative which planted more than 350-million trees in a single day. Especially considering that here in Ontario we have set our sights low, striving to plant a mere 50-million trees between 2008 and 2020. Disappointingly, recognizing that there are still about 33-million trees that need to be planted by Dec. 31 it appears we still set the bar too high. Despite Ethiopia's monumental achievement and the hope it inspires worldwide, it is impossible to overlook the toxic cloud hovering over Brazil and what it is signaling to the rest of the planet. When the news of the fires charring what many scientists identify as the *'Lungs of the Earth'* first broke, Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro was quick to point a finger at environmental NGOs, accusing them of starting the fires intentionally to get people's attention. Less than 24 hours later I learned that this accusation was not based in evidence of any sort, and that Bolsonaro was now suggesting that the fires were instead lit intentionally by cattle ranchers, loggers and miners slashing and burning up the rainforest to make way for *'progress.'* Having been elected on a promise to cut *'red tape'* and push development and business at all cost in the Amazon, the finger quickly turned back on Bolsonaro as the chief architect of the rainforest's demise. When Bolsonaro changed the law to make it less illegal for such short-sighted, resource-thirsty *'entrepreneurs'* to cut, torch and clear the rainforest, he did so knowing that his government could be held accountable should its new policies *'policies that strip away measures in place to protect the land, water and rights of Indigenous people'* facilitate such a disaster. Though Bolsonaro's government understood that their policies had the potential to ignite such an environmental catastrophe like the one still burning in the Amazon, they still opted for the *'business at all costs'* model of governing that is currently being tested out in Ontario as well as several other Canadian provinces and in *'Trump's USA.'* If the Buddhists are right about one's greatest enemies *'in this case enemies of a healthy planet and future'* having the potential to be one's greatest teacher, than there has to be a lesson here somewhere for humanity. What Bolsonaro, and politicians like him have taught us in the past month is that they are willing to spend every penny put away for the future to make a quick and dirty buck

today. Most importantly, they teach us that each and every vote does matter. They also force us to ask questions; to look deeper at ourselves, and how we want to define the communities we call home. Before Canadians go to the polls on Oct. 21 we need to ask ourselves if we can afford to elect such self-interested leaders who despise democracy and prefer governing from the top down? Can we afford to elect a government willing to stand idly by and watch as the gap between the rich and the poor widens and the climate crisis unravels before us? Why is it I feel like I have asked these questions before voting in previous elections? Nevertheless, it is time to honour our responsibility to understand the repercussions of our vote; to question our candidates and educate ourselves about the people and parties vying to lead us. It is time again to learn from our political mistakes of the past and present, so that we don't make them again in the future.