

No place for blind faith in politics



Sept. 24, 2019

By Nate Smelle

Over the past month, I had the privilege of removing myself from the Canadian news cycle. I considered this opportunity to withdraw a privilege because as a journalist and politics junkie I tend to be immersed in the national conversation in one way or another on a daily basis. Such an immersion is also a privilege, however it can also be exhausting to the point where one finds difficulty seeing the forest for the trees.

Although I also purposely stayed away from any news coming out of Canada online during my time in Addis Ababa, I still managed to spend a significant amount of time soaking in the news from Ethiopia, France, London, Eritrea, Palestine, Pakistan, Dubai and the United States. It is worth noting that for good or ill Canada was mostly absent from the world stage the entire month, with the exception of a 15-second clip on CNN showing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gleefully shaking hands with US President Donald Trump at the G7 Summit in Biarritz, France.

Switching on the television each morning and every night before bed to catch the news by and for people from places I had for the most part only ever read about, was an eye-opening adventure on its own. Looking forward to each day's broadcasts despite the usually grim nature of the news being reported, I made it a daily ritual to pay attention to these unique perspectives of the world we share.

Perched on my hotel room balcony one morning, photographing a friendly looking donkey carrying a way too heavy load through the streets below, I turned on the TV to see how the world had changed overnight.

Dominating the TV screen on this day as I swallowed my morning dose of coffee and news were images of: monstrous wildfires burning up the Amazon rainforest in Brazil and the Greek Island of Evia; an 11-year-old girl crying for the return of her father who had been detained by ICE officers in Mississippi and was to be deported; an update on the white supremacist who murdered 22 people at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas; and a report on 11 politicians and 17 journalists who have been imprisoned since they were arrested by the Eritrean government in 2001 for criticizing President Isaias Afwerki.

Picking away at a plate of chechebsa while sipping my third cup of bunna, I assessed the state of politics around the world and speculated on how it related to the state of politics in Canada. With October's federal election looming in the back of my mind, I thought about how Canada's lack of newsworthiness on the world stage would soon change once the inevitable political scandals and mudslinging part and parcel with an election begins.

However, by the tone of the news that morning the silence from Canada on the international front might not be a bad thing. Then again inaction and complacency with the status quo will not change things for the better.

Taking notes on the news I noticed a quote by the Chinese philosopher and sage Lao Tzu that I scrawled down during the flight a week earlier. It read 'The biggest revelation is silence.'

A month later now and I am still contemplating Canada's absence in the international media and what the 'biggest revelation' is resonating from this silence.

I like to think that maybe as we are sitting here quietly, we are reflecting on the many lessons that nature, and governments worldwide are teaching us. Maybe we are investigating the parties, leaders and candidates so that we can cast an informed vote. Then again, maybe we are just hibernating until hockey season.

In many ways elections are like the Stanley Cup playoffs in that anyone truly committed to a campaign is willing to drip every ounce of their blood, sweat and tears into their team's pot if it will help them become victorious. Likewise, as with every Stanley Cup Final there is also always a loser. Unlike on the ice, far too often the biggest losers in the electoral process are not the key players involved, they are the uninformed voters who devote their support to a party without questioning if what that party stands for in 2019 truly reflects their family's needs and values. That's why we need to invest as much time in choosing our governments as we do in following our favourite team. Democracy only works when we ask questions and employ the knowledge and wisdom we have gained.

There are similarities, but politics is not hockey. For example, it is OK to be a die-hard Ottawa Senators fan, because aside from one's own pride, this sort of poor decision will not put humanity and the Earth's future in jeopardy. On the other hand, choosing the wrong government, as we have seen repeatedly in the past, has the potential to destroy our quality of life now and in the future. Attaching one's blind faith to a political party because your 'grand-pappy' used to vote that way makes as much sense as picking your favourite hockey team by the colour of the jersey. Such blind faith does not belong in politics. It does nothing but reinforce a status quo that has been failing far too many people and the planet, for far too long.