

# This too shall pass

By Bill Kilpatrick

It's hard to be a student of modern European history and have hope these days. An amusing cartoon with a father and a son chatting sums up the way that most students of history likely feel. It says "Those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it. Yet those who do study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it." Just to be clear, if there is one thing that I learned from studying history it's this: history does not repeat itself. While there may be historical echoes or rhymes it's always a different stage with different actors. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus summed up this phenomena best when he said "No man steps in the same river twice for it is not the same river and he is not the same man."

Still, so many historical actors claim that history indeed repeats itself. The Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana said "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." And no less a figure than Winston Churchill said "Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Karl Marx even threw his hat into the historical quote ring stating, rather sardonically, "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce."

Seeing what's happening around the world, especially with our southern neighbours, it's hard not to agree with Marx. The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw had this to say about the notion of history repeating itself "If history repeats itself, and the unexpected always happens, how incapable must humans be of learning from experience." How incapable, indeed. I think experience here is the key, not taught history, but historical experience which leads to collective memory and often, but not always, collective action. Once collective memory is destroyed a dictator or tyrant is free to create their own memories and versions of history and as George Orwell observed in his classic book on totalitarianism 1984 "Those who control the present control the past and those who control the past control the future."

We in North America have grown up at a time of immense stability and wealth relative to other time periods that were wrought with plagues, multiple wars, and social instability, but the last 70 years have been relatively stable here. We have never known tyrants, dictators, or military dictatorships, while we have generally agreed to disagree politically, we have agreed that conversation is better than violence, voting is better than a dictatorship, peace is better than war, science is better than quackery, and truth, although sometimes unsettling, is still better than lies.

We have lived in relative comfort and freedom, but that is all changing before our very eyes and if you're anything like me it has caught you off guard and you feel like you have no footing, no common ground to feel stable on. I often feel like I'm treading water in the hopes of finding something to cling to, and when I think I've found something only then do I feel it slip through my hands. Things feel out of control, like we are all just watching a massive human tragedy unfold that involves us all, but we are mere bystanders, helpless to stop the overwhelming momentum of authoritarianism.

Politics has become so toxic that many people feel that it's best to disengage and retreat to some sense of comfort away from the madness, but as Pericles once remarked "Just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you." And make no mistake politics is interested in all of us, and it's never been more important to engage in politics because as Plato observed about political disengagement "The price good people pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men." The record turn out at the advanced polls across Canada tells me that people see the threat to our democracy and are not resigning themselves to indifference.

We are in a time period that is referred to as an interregnum, a time between political periods where the old liberal-democratic world order is under attack and a new autocratic world order is trying to replace it. It's a time that lacks clear leadership when the normal functions of government, the economy, and society are suspended or nonexistent. It's a time when a clear path forward seems unknown. It's a time of divisions, anxiety, and fear. Make no mistake we are at a dangerous time in history, but we have been here before and survived. Just because we are struggling to see a clear path forward does not mean that one doesn't exist. We will find our bearings again and we will chart a path forward. As Martin Luther King Jr. has argued "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it

bends towards justice.?

The Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels once quipped that "This will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed." I wonder if he reflected on this comment as his 1000-year Reich came to an end in a mere 12 years. Seeing the results of the election and the resounding rejection of Pierre Poilievre's American style politics gives me hope and renews my belief that we are capable of learning from our experiences. Canadians looked to the south and said "No way. Not in my country," but the fight is not over.

In an April 27 speech in New Hampshire Democratic Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker gave what political historian Heather Cox-Richardson called a "barn-burning" speech where he utterly rejected the politics of authoritarianism and autocracy and urged Americans, and everyone else for that matter, to "fight everywhere and all at once."

According to Richardson, Pritzker said, and it deserves to be quoted at length, "I understand the tendency to give in to despair right now, but despair is an indulgence that we cannot afford in the times upon which history turns. Never before in my life have I called for mass protests, for mobilization, for disruption, but I am now. "They [the MAGA Republicans] have to understand that we will fight their cruelty with every megaphone and microphone that we have. We must castigate them on the soap box, and then punish them at the ballot box. "and if it sounds like I'm becoming contemptuous of Donald Trump and the people that he has elevated, it's because I am. You should be too. They are an affront to every value this country was founded upon. "Cowardice can be contagious, but so can courage. "Tonight, I'm telling you what I'm willing to do?is fight?for our democracy, for our liberty, for the opportunity for all our people to live lives that are meaningful and free. And I see around me tonight a roomful of people who are ready to do the same."

America is mobilizing to save their democracy; Canada has taken the first step at the ballot box, but the fight is just beginning because, as the old saying goes, the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. While I believe that this difficult historical period will too pass, it won't unless we see to it that history is not repeated, as William Faulkner has said of history "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Today we celebrate a small victory for our democracy, tomorrow we must continue to defend it.