

Divisive politics

By Anthony Carnovale

In his autobiography, *Invitation of a Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov shares the story of a young chronophobic (one who fears time) watching a family movie that had been taken a few weeks before the young man's birth. The man saw a world that was relatively unchanged- the same house, the same people- and then he realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence. Nabokov continues: "But what particularly frightened him was the sight of a brand new baby carriage standing there on the porch, with the smug, encroaching air of a coffin; even that was empty, as if, in the reverse course of events, his very bones have disintegrated".

I've never forgotten that passage. In fact, I've never been able to read past it. I try, but it has the same effect on me as the empty carriage does on the young man. It makes me conscious of the void that bookends all of our lives and the time in-between. Time is a human construct - something that early humans derived from the cosmic rhythms of the universe - the sun rises, the sun sets, the seasons come and go. The pattern of these rhythms gave the early humans a sense of time. Today, time is so much more than the simple tick-tocking of a clock; we are obsessed with it. Time is everywhere- on our wrists, in our cars, on our phones, computers, DVD players, stoves, microwaves. Time is integral to how we manage our lives (I have set 61 different times for the alarm on my phone); every digital message we send is stamped with a time; we record the time of our birth, the time of our death; our time on earth will be marked on our tombstones. There is no escaping it (a monthly calendar reminds me of prison cells). The Doomsday Clock is set two and a half minutes to midnight.

I've been thinking about our relationship with time, ever since the controversy surrounding the removal of the Sir John A. Macdonald statue in Victoria, B.C. began. The removal of the statue added to the growing debate over how to view historical figures through a contemporary moral lens.

It's the response by the 'conservative' establishment - federal, provincial and local - that confounds me. I've read articles; I've scrolled through social media timelines. They use phrases like 'protect our history', 'stand up for our heritage'. Andrew Scheer summed it up when he stood before Conservative Party of Canada delegates last weekend and proclaimed: "I think it's a disgrace that we're allowing extreme voices in this country to erase our proud heritage." Who is the 'our' that he's referring to?

I sense that there is something more at play here. I sense it when I hear: 'Make Canada Great Again'; 'extreme multiculturalism'; 'This is Trudeau's fault. Real Canadians understand this.' I know it when I hear: 'We need Maxine Bernier to take control before Canada has no identity.' I sense it when local politicians engage in fan-boy politics and make rash decisions that simply incite their base, while exhibiting zero empathy for the people who would be most affected by their decisions. This is divisive politics.

The current conservative establishment comes across as hostile to anyone challenging their core beliefs - family, freedom, security, success. Conservatives seem to harbor some sort of a fear of foreigners and an aversion against other kinds of people who are not part of the established order. On one hand you have people saying they respect aboriginal history, while on the other they're inviting the Sir John A. Macdonald statue to be housed in a community where survivors of the residential school system live. I hear this type of rhetoric and see these sorts of actions also being played out in the U.S., England and Europe. In response, borders are being redrawn, divisive laws being written, walls are being built, and far-right parties are becoming increasingly mainstream. The responses may be varied; the sentiment is the same.

Since his party came to power, Doug Ford has rolled back the sex-ed curriculum by 20 years (a time before cellphones and Facebook); Progressive Conservative MPP's have stood up in the Legislature to complain about attempts by extremists to erase Canadian history, but the party recently ordered the erasure of the words 'climate change' from provincial websites - proof that they're more concerned about the past than they are the future. In 2014, Ford described a home for developmentally disabled youth as a 'nightmare' that had 'ruined the community'. His party has put a hold onto opening any new safe-injection sites despite the evidence of their effectiveness (this will cost lives); and, his party has subsidized beer companies to fulfill their 'buck-a-beer' campaign promise, while at the same time cutting arts programs for vulnerable youth in the GTA.

Where does it come from? Are conservatives inherently bigoted (Remember Lynn Beyak Kellie Leitch, Sir John A. Macdonald?); resentful to the poor? Are they chronophobics? I can't say. I do know that Canada's history and power dynamics are marked by the cultural genocide of indigenous peoples, the subordination of LGBT people and people of color. Does preserving the past maintain that subordination? Some suggest that many people are struggling to make sense of all the challenges to what it means to be a human being, a global citizen, a Canadian. Conservative policies and priorities make it seem this way.

Things change. What it means to be man, a woman, a citizen and a Canadian are all being re-negotiated. Don't be afraid; be excited!

Canada's history is being re-written. This is an opportunity to reimagine who we are as human beings, who we are as Canadians.
What can be more exhilarating, and necessary, than that?

It's a brutal business, Time.

Tick-tock goes the clock.