

## Two sides of the same coin

By Anthony Carnovale

A few years into my teaching career, I was asked to accompany a group of students to a Microsoft convention that was being held in Toronto. We sat in on a symposium with Microsoft executives and government officials; we heard a bombastic, and neurotic, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer give the keynote address; we also had the opportunity to meet the then Prime Minister, Stephen Harper.

I remember being ushered into the basement of the Metro Toronto Convention Centre by a half-dozen security officials. I remember the kids being anxious. I remember Harper coming around the corner and greeting each kid. He shook their hands, asked their names. He asked them questions and listened to their responses. Harper talked about high school and politics; he told the students to dream big and work hard. I remember wanting to say something witty, but not being able to say anything at all. On the bus trip home, I felt like I had just met a celebrity; I was smitten.

I was confused by my reaction. I was not a fan of Stephen Harper. I was angry at his tax cuts; his abysmal record on the environment; his limits to access to information. Harper doubled the budget for prisons at a time when crime was on the decline. Harper was a political thug. We shook hands; I felt like a victim of a shakedown. When I told my colleague about my reaction she said: 'My friend, you just met a very good politician?.'

As a rule, I don't trust politicians; I don't like politicians. For example, I wasn't impressed by Barack Obama. Yes, the man could speak; he understood the power of words and rhetoric. He was responsible for some wonderfully progressive policies. He was also responsible for the unfortunate U.S. response to the Ebola crisis. His tepid response to the 2008 financial crisis made life difficult for a lot of people. He bungled the U.S. response to the civil war in Syria. Under his watch, journalists were spied upon, prosecuted and imprisoned. There are reports that his covert drone war was responsible for killing up to 1,000 civilians. True, he was a larger-than-life public figure that inspired millions ? so did Donald Trump.

To me, Obama and Trump are two sides of the same coin. Obama begat Trump. Without Obama's mixture of swagger (some would say arrogance) and naivety, there is no constituency or emotional space for someone like Trump. Without Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne there would no constituency or emotional space for someone like Doug Ford. (McGuinty resigned in 2012 after scandals involving health care, the mismanagement of government agencies, the cancelled gas plants and the violation of protesters' civil rights during the G20 summit in Toronto. Wynne? Well, she didn't.

When I was younger, politics, and geopolitical affairs, were things that interested other people. I remember big-ticket items: Mulroney, Reagan, Thatcher; free trade; violence in the Middle East; an oil crisis; a thing called a 'recession'; a place called Meech Lake. Politics was my father complaining about high taxes, and never telling us who he voted for. Pierre Elliot Trudeau was a legend. Joe Clark was prime minister for a minute; Kim Campbell for a few seconds. I remember 'Rae days' and walking through picket lines to get into my school. Mel Lastman was annoying. Bill Clinton played: a) saxophone b) a White House intern. George Bush was evil. Mike Harris? Next. I don't remember any of these people being 'exemplary' or particularly inspiring.

Like most people, the older I get the more attention I pay to politics. As a father, teacher, writer and citizen, there are some fundamental issues that I feel need to be addressed in this country: income inequality; poverty; populism; the precarious workforce and economy; artificial intelligence; the so-called 'refugee crisis'; fake news; indigenous issues; a broken democratic system; rising personal debt; stagnant wages; the housing crisis; climate change. After watching the federal debates, I'm not convinced any of the federal leaders have what it takes to address these issues in any meaningful way. After watching the Dufferin-Caledon All-Candidates Forum, I was even less hopeful.

Candidates sat in a row, like birds on a wire. Most answered questions from prepared statements. Some candidates barely registered a pulse. I was surprised to see the Christian Heritage Party take part (as a rule, I avoid any organization with the word 'Heritage'). I

can't imagine much creativity coming from a party that has the Bible as its main point of reference. Why do the past few Dufferin-Caledon NDP candidates look as if they'd rather be doing something else, somewhere else? The Liberal and Conservatives candidates were blasé in their demeanor and delivery. The candidate that impressed me the most was Stefan Wiesen. He came across as being honest and forthright; he was animated, funny and engaging. The man has a personality. Can he lead? Does he have new solutions for some old problems? Can he help the less fortunate in this region? Can he find ways to avert an environmental calamity while creating jobs and securing housing for young couples and families? Who knows?

What I do know is this: the person I will vote for will be the person that will, most likely, break from the status quo. I'm looking for someone who's not afraid to take risks, not afraid to try new things, and not afraid to be critical and creative when dealing with complex issues.

Am I asking for too much? Or are you asking for too little?

The other day, I took my kids grocery shopping. After we picked up some flowers for my wife, my four-year old daughter sat in the shopping cart and belted out, and butchered, the lyrics to 'O Canada'. It was just what I needed to hear: a new interpretation of something tired and worn. I hope our next government has the nerve to be creative, take a few risks and not be afraid to shake things up.