

BROCK'S BANTER: A hopeful spark

By Brock Weir

I'll admit it ? since last November I have been watching what has been going on south of our border with dismay, mouth lightly agape, as if watching a painfully slow moving car crash.

I'm sure I am not alone.

Whatever your political stance might be, there is uncertainty everywhere.

As such, I wasn't sure quite what I was getting myself into last week when I ventured into the United States for the first time since the election.

I was last there in September and, despite that being such a short time ago, it now seems a world away.

At that point, the candidates had been selected, the debates were in full swing, and the campaign was in the final stretch.

That particular trip was to California so, perhaps unsurprisingly, there was a sea of blue on the lawns in support of Secretary Clinton, with just a few blotches of red thrown out on the lawn by people daring to be different. Here and there, however, this field of uniform blue with a few drops of red were punctuated by signs from the holdouts, the Bernie-or-Busters still clinging for a miracle. In September, there was an assured sense of satisfaction in the air that the United States would, in just a few more weeks, be led by Hillary Clinton with many people painting the eventual victor as little more than a distasteful distraction from far more important and perilous issues in the world.

A month, as we know, is a long time in politics. And seven months? Well, that's an eternity.

Over that time, we have seen rhetoric ramped up, drama becoming increasingly high, protests a regular occurrence, and counter-protests becoming commonplace.

We have seen individuals become increasingly divided over personality and policy, sometimes claiming ostracism for daring to express their views, and others shrinking away from those who are daring to resist.

So, with that in mind, I wondered if I would see any of this division manifest itself firsthand.

Okay, so New York City is probably not the best place to go in the United States to gauge divisions in a post-November climate, giving its reputation as a liberal stronghold, but it is the best I can do at this particular point in time.

At the outset it seemed like the trip was getting off to an auspicious start.

Amid a barrage of reports recently of individuals getting bumped from their oversold flights, sometimes dragged off the aircraft kicking, screaming, bloodied, I got on my plane ? a Westjet flight ? with an approximate capacity of 120 as one of just 14 passengers.

With just a fraction of the plane filled, there was far too much elbow room to be a barometer of the political climate that was to come. That would have to wait ? but not very much longer.

Getting off the plane along with my 13 fellow passengers and the tumbleweed that kept blowing down the centre aisle, it was time to figure out ground transportation from LaGuardia to the place I was staying in midtown Manhattan.

Eventually, they hustled me onto a bus they ensured would take me to the correct subway. To their credit, they were correct, and it was off on the train.

There was an eclectic mix of people in my particular subway car; individuals of all colours and creeds, all ages, whose voices blended together in a one-off symphony of international accents.

Eventually, my eyes landed on two teens.

I'm not sure why they settled on these two guys in particular, but my gut told me that I should keep at least one eye on the situation.

They were visible minorities and the strength of their respective accents, coupled with their estimated ages, made me hazard a reasonable guess that they hadn't been in the United States all that long.

They spoke English well, but every once in a while they talked amongst themselves in Spanish, possibly natives of a Latin American country.

Their well-worn clothes told me one of two things: they either didn't have money enough for new threads or they had more than enough and were actually fashionistas with a flair for the distressed.

It was, however, most likely the former situation.

After a few stops, one of the teens got out and the other sat down with a discarded free newspaper, which happened to be bearing a typically lurid, eye-catching headline chronicling the latest turmoil in the Trump administration, a front page similar to the bold covers that the New York Post has become particularly celebrated on social media since Trump entered the presidential race.

A moment later, an impeccably dressed Caucasian fellow boarded the subway.

He was clearly a man of means. Taking a quick glance at his slightly-open tote bag, he had at least six different playbills to Broadway shows sticking out, and tickets to those shows certainly don't come cheap. Oh, there was also the Rolex on his wrist. Looking for a place to sit down, he eventually zeroed in on the spot next to the teen, who was still reading the paper.

After sitting down, the man tapped a finger on the front page, made a clever remark against the cover boy, the teen chuckled, and, for the duration of my portion of the trip, they discussed a shared dislike of the direction their shared country is going in, the importance of standing up for what they believe in, and never losing sight of the ultimate goal.

In this moment, a shared sense of values fostered an exchange of ideas between two people who might not otherwise have given each other a second glance.

They found common ground and, in each other, a sense of belonging.

As I look back, I wonder what other topics of conversation cropped up after I got off the train near Times Square.

It was just a fleeting moment in time, a fleeting moment that left a lasting impression on this outsider looking in, but now, nearly two weeks later, do either of them have a recollection of it?

On the one hand, I hope the answer to this question is yes, and both of them got off at their respective stops inspired to do more, and do what they can.

On the other hand, perhaps it's more fitting to hope that answer is no and that these little vignettes are so commonplace for those who live them that they are, in the end, hardly worth remembering.

Whichever instance is ultimately the case, I came back to Canada with my sense of neighbourly pride buoyed.

If these conversations are now the new normal, there is hope.

If they are rare, there is also hope in the possibilities of what they spark.