

BROCK'S BANTER: Onward for the Onleys

By Brock Weir

Despite knowing it has been coming for a while, it now seems like the time has come to think about just who Prime Minister Stephen Harper will choose as David Onley's successor as the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario in the coming weeks.

After two extensions since his appointment in 2008, this week Mr. Onley will become Ontario's longest-serving Lieutenant-Governor since the end of the Second World War.

I don't know if his previous profession had anything to do with it, but I have been watching his tenure as the Vice Regal representative in Ontario with great interest over the years. I was familiar with his work as an on-camera reporter and, later, a weatherman for CITY TV and, as such, he brought a modicum of star power to the office.

On Sunday, I was thrilled to be invited to attend an event in Toronto to pay tribute to the Onley's service to Ontario.

Although there is always a degree of formality when the Queen's Representative – whether Federally or Provincially – is in attendance, it was intended to be an informal way for people from all walks of life who had been touched by the vice-regal couple in one way or another, to pay tribute to their service.

Some individuals came forward to salute their promotion of the Crown, while others recalled working with one or both of them on a variety of charitable endeavours, or simply praying alongside them in their Scarborough community church.

Some speeches, however, shone an unlikely light on the guests of honour.

One such speaker was Derwin Mak, a science fiction writer and Dr. Who enthusiast who spoke of his efforts to get Mr. Onley, himself a one-hit science fiction novelist, to grace a Toronto comic book convention. He accepted the invitation.

‘We were really glad that you didn't give us the typical speech by a public dignitary,’ said Derwin. ‘Instead, you talked about assembling the model kit to the flying saucer for the TV series *The Invaders*. You also talked about *Lost In Space* and the Land of the Giants. To show that you're keeping in touch with current affairs, you compared the original *Battlestar Galactica* to the reboot.

‘One of the convention attendees told me, ‘He has geek cred!’ I thought he was just a weatherman at CITY!’

Signing off, by telling Mr. Onley to live long and prosper, the Man of the Hour jokingly scolded the speaker for not mentioning that his once sci-fi novel is now available on Kindle.

In his remarks in reply, Mr. Onley shared his mixed emotions knowing his term was coming to an end. ‘All the world is a stage?’ he said, introducing the well-worn phrase, adding that when he and Ruth Ann take their cues to step off the stage, they will do so into undetermined roles – and they have yet to know when exactly when Mr. Harper will give them the proverbial hook.

In addition to paying tributes to the Queen herself, he also shed light on some of his own objectives when he was appointed to Queen's Park over six years ago.

‘The paramount objective has been to enhance the role of the office for the community and the culture of Ontario,’ he said. ‘The overarching theme of my term of office has been accessibility and I define it as that which allows people to achieve their full potential.

‘Accessibility is not the sole prerogative of people with disabilities. Many people are isolated on the margins of society because they live with invisible disabilities, or they are in a state of poverty, or lack education.’

After noting his alarm at the ‘unacceptably high level of unemployment for disabled people’ in the Province of Ontario, it struck me that this definition of accessibility is one everyone should take to heart, across the Province, including Aurora, where people who have taken it upon themselves to advocate for accessibility issues seem to be at loggerheads over the very idea to turn Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park, formerly Civic Square Park, into a showpiece of an open space featuring an accessible playground.

Regular readers of Page 4 here will be familiar with both sides of the debate, with local accessibility advocate Tyler Barker taking the ‘pro’ position and Councillor Wendy Gaertner, a fellow member of Aurora's Accessibility Advisory Committee, citing financial matters, taking the ‘con.’

I will not rehash the points of either in that debate, but remarks made at Sunday's event provided an interesting contrast to our own debate.

Recalling a visit being made by Mr. and Mrs. Onley to Port Hope to unveil a memorial to Joseph Scriven, who wrote the hymn ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus’ in the Town in the 1850s, Port Hope's Stephen Smith attempted to portray a ‘lesser known’ aspect of Mr. Onley's service. ‘While their honours were participating in the event, His Honour noticed an accessible children's playground being built in another corner of the same park and asked about it,’ he recalled. ‘I had been told it was the result of a severely disabled young boy wondering why he couldn't play with other kids.

?[Onley] asked to meet this boy, Zac. The playground is called Zac's Dream because Zac figured prominently in creating the awareness and raising the money to build it. I saw Zac and His Honour have an extended chat at the Scriven Event, after which their honours asked to be invited back to the opening of the finished Zac's Dream.?

They got the invite, and they were on hand to cut the ribbon.

At the end of the day, Port Hope constructed Zac's Dream at one end of their Memorial Park to the tune of approximately \$135,000. Through Zac's efforts and the community at large, over \$70,000 was contributed by groups such as the Port Hope Rotary Club, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, various local foundations and corporations, to make the project a reality.

Last week, Councillor Gaertner wrote that the reasons she objected to the park plan, along with Councillors Chris Ballard and John Gallo, was that \$240,000 of tax dollars had been used to create the park, which now includes small rolling hills and a diminutive soccer pitch.

?Councillors Ballard, Gallo and I thought that it would be completely fiscally irresponsible to spend another \$150,000 of your hard earned money to redo this existing park! she concluded, questioning why an undeveloped piece of parkland was not chosen for a new accessible park.

Regardless, the deed is done, the decision to go forward with the accessibility playground in the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park is more or less a done deal, so let's now get creative to lessen that particular tax burden like Port Hope. If they can do it, so can we ? and whether they are still public citizens, or have been sent by the PM back to private life, let's make sure we have the Onleys on hand to do the honours.?