

BROCK'S BANTER: Uptown Abbey

By Brock Weir

It's a day many anglophiles in this community have been dreading, and it is almost upon us.

For the past six-or-so-years, a number of people around these parts ? some whom I never would have guessed ? have become transfixed by the goings on of the Crawley family on Downton Abbey. I say, ?or so,? because this infatuation may be a bit longer if you decided to hop on the Abbey bandwagon early by watching the series online in ways that are not quite legal.

I'm not here to judge, but I am sorry to report that this past Sunday, PBS aired the penultimate episode of the series and there is just one episode left for the creators to tie up all loose ends.

Will they do it? Well, I know the answer, but this is going to be a spoiler free zone for people still playing catch up or planning to go all out in a March Break binge.

I have spent more time than is healthy pondering the success of the series. It's soapy, it's camp, it's got drama high and low, and some plot lines have been goosed along their way by very unlikely means. Perhaps that is the winning formula. It is escapism pure and simple; a chance to see how the other half ? or the one per cent of the Edwardian and Interwar one per cent ? lived. And, hey, it's fun.

Another key to the success, I think viewers can agree, is Dame Maggie Smith, whose blustery performance as the Dowager has secured iconic status in its time and has entered (or re-entered) new and once-popular phrases back into the popular lexicon.

Dame Maggie once said she modeled her performance on Queen Mary ? both the woman and the ship ? able to cut through the crowd, and the B.S. with attitude, swagger, and bearing.

Everyone knows someone like her character. I'm sure from time to time most of us wish we could be so quick to produce a withering remark should the occasion call for one. And we all need as many tools as possible to successfully cut through the B.S.

As I sat through last week's Regional Council meeting where York Region's political representatives once again convened to discuss whether or not they would like to see their Chair elected in a free Region-wide vote, I had one of the Dowager's bon mots in the forefront of my mind.

?It must be cold up there on the moral high ground,? she once said with a snide snort to one relative who has been a particular thorn in her side.

And, as the meeting progressed, I wondered how some of the people around the table were enjoying the climate.

Specifically, I would have directed the question to some of the more strenuous opponents of electing the Regional Chair.

Last week, I had an email from a reader stating after reading last week's Banter he was unsure whether I was for or against an elected Regional Chair so, at the outset, I will re-state that I support the idea of an elected chair in principle. Generally, I am in favour of any mechanisms that give taxpayers a direct say in the decisions ? and decision-makers ? that have an immediate impact on them.

However, as much as I consider the possibilities and the positives an elected Chair would bring to the Region, I am having trouble envisioning a practical way in which such a system could be implemented throughout York in a way that would not only be cost-effective but engaging to potential voters.

That being said, I found it curious that one of the main objections the objecting Regional Councillors had to the tenor of the debate was not solely on the merits ? or lack thereof ? of going down the elected route, but over the implication from some Councillors that keeping the status quo was, in some way, hindering transparency.

I disagree.

The arguments provided by the proponents were sound ones, in my view.

Of course an elected Chair would increase transparency at the Region because it will give area residents an idea of just what the man or woman at the helm of York Region stands for and what her or his priorities are. The last time around, residents got that as it was very clear from his time as mayor of Whitchurch-Stouffville what Wayne Emerson stood for and, had he not been appointed to the position by the members sitting around that table, the same could also be said for his primary challenger, John Taylor, who had recently been re-elected as Regional Representative for Newmarket as well.

But, that is never guaranteed to be the case. Anyone can be appointed to the position if they are able to garner the support of enough people around the table.

Proponents also argued that it would increase accountability at the Region as the Regional Chair would be held accountable to the electorate.

Again, a fair point ? or so I thought.

It was somewhat disheartening to see efforts ostensibly to increase 'transparency and accountability' at a certain level of government to be spun by those advocating to keep the selection of the Regional Chair status quo to indicate those looking for a change were suggesting the Region, as it stands, is not transparent and accountable.

Regional Chair Emerson, along with Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti and even Mayor Dawe presented their cases as if the very suggestion that the Region was not currently transparent was a personal affront. Even following clarification from the Councillors presenting said arguments, the pearl clutching continued.

In our interview ahead of his annual address to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce earlier this month, Mayor Dawe said he believed the issue of electing the Regional Chair was somewhat of a red herring from the real issue plaguing the Region and that is the overall governance structure. I tend to agree, but the umbrage being offered last week at the very mention of the T-word was a red herring from the real issue as well.

No one was suggesting the Region is not transparent or accountable, but it is healthy to admit there is always room for improvement. In fact, in this day and age, looking at ways to continually improve is vital to a healthy democracy.