

The Year of COVID19

Author: The Honourable Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Lieutenant Governor of Ontario

In the midst of a global pandemic there has been some time for reflection. Much of mine was about public service and leadership during these strange and uncertain times.

I found myself contemplating the role of a Lieutenant Governor during an unprecedented crisis. I knew, inherently, that there were meaningful opportunities to engage with and respond to Ontarians. First, that the apolitical Crown could stand for continuity but apart from the political fray. And second, that it could –more significantly– concern itself solely for the well-being of all citizens during a tumultuous and uncertain time.

For decades Her Majesty has inspired us by simply being present. Our Office needed to be a source of trust: responsive, available, and steady. To meet the primacy of this objective we adapted and made important changes to the ways we have traditionally operated – but all in a vital effort to stay connected. To perform my constitutional responsibilities, I needed to be readily accessible at Queen’s Park; to perform my obligations to Ontarians I needed to hear and understand their daily challenges, even if that meant virtually rather than in person.

My thoughts are informed by the hundreds of virtual conversations I have had with leaders throughout Ontario during this pandemic –leaders in virtually all sectors– from local government to not-for-profit organizations; from hospitals and first responders to women’s shelters; from educational institutions to businesses and industries. Citizens are seeking leadership. They recognize and reward it when they see it.

It will not surprise you that I heard stories that were poignant – people are vulnerable and they are grieving. But equally I was inspired by stories of collaboration, courage, creativity and adaptation. Solidarity, empathy, and acts of kindness. Compelling stories of



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anxiety and hope in equal measure.

Of the many observations I draw from these private conversations – let me focus on just a few that are directly relevant to the way forward.

The first remark made by so many was about collaboration among orders of government. Almost without exception, in my hundreds of interactions,

people commented positively on the fact that federal, provincial and municipal authorities were coming together in common cause. Partisanship was almost invisible. They mused: Wouldn't it be wonderful if that became the norm?

I was also struck by the visible role played by municipal governments – the order of government that is often forgotten, taken for granted. Yet this is the order closest to people and absolutely crucial in building cohesive communities during a time of crisis. Not surprisingly, they are looking ahead – seizing the opportunity to build capacity. Quite simply, physically and socially they are strengthening communities, both responding to citizens everyday needs while laying the foundation for a more resilient future.

A second observation was the trust and confidence in science that resulted in evidence-based decision-making. Who knew that we would come to recognize the names and faces of Chief Medical Officers from coast to coast to coast? Of course, we also learned that not everyone understands how science works – that the best advice evolves and is reactive as opposed to remaining constant or still (hence the debate about masks and the speed of closing borders). Overall, despite instances of confusion, there has been acceptance of states of emergency. Generally, people are following the rules of good hygiene, self-isolation, physical distancing, and travel bans. All the while, with a singular focus, researchers have made remarkable leaps forward by developing a vaccine in record time.

The concurrent lesson learned is the absolute necessity of clear and consistent communication. For those developing and implementing public policy, communication is fundamental in building trust among citizens. Indeed, some very wise people have noted that we only make progress at the speed of trust.

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Thirdly, the pandemic has illustrated vividly the fact of our interconnectedness. Few can recall any other circumstance in their lifetimes when everyone, everywhere, has been affected by an event. The closing of borders is unthinkable and the repatriating of citizens

most challenging. Who knew the fragility of our supply chains and how dependent we really are on other nations? Ultimately, we will not be safe in our neighborhoods and provinces until everyone is safe around the world.

For years those in the environmental community have been trying to teach us about ecosystems, and the imperative of systemic and holistic thinking. This pandemic has illustrated that we still operate in silos – that there are many disconnects. Perhaps most tragically and dramatically we saw the disconnect between our healthcare system and the long-term care of our senior citizens.

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As evidence of that lesson, it is fascinating to see that leaders, as they turn their attention to plan for a restart of the economy, are realizing that recovery may well be dependent upon an effective system of childcare and education. We've read of a new addition to our vocabulary – a “shecession”. Perhaps the separation of economic and social sectors is really a false distinction. Systemic thinking is demanded as never before as we come to recognize the interconnectivity between all sectors, disciplines, and future plans. Everything is connected to everything else.



The Lieutenant Governor joins Toronto Public Library staff and volunteers to prepare food boxes for the North York Harvest Food Bank at their Albion Branch.

For some, the policy framework called “sustainability” that connects the dots between economic prosperity, environmental stewardship, and social and cultural cohesion is not a bad place to start in a pandemic.

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We are a prosperous country. Yet, if we look closely, we see lives of quiet desperation. This pandemic is being experienced very differently by the rich and the poor. We are all being forced to examine the systemic racism against Black Canadians, people of colour, and Indigenous peoples; the importance of mental health supports; the quality of life of migrant agricultural workers, and those of differing abilities and disabilities. More than once I have heard someone remark that there is no vaccine for poverty, hunger, homelessness, or inequality.

And finally, and not surprisingly, there is an unmistakable hunger for normalcy. The primary source of

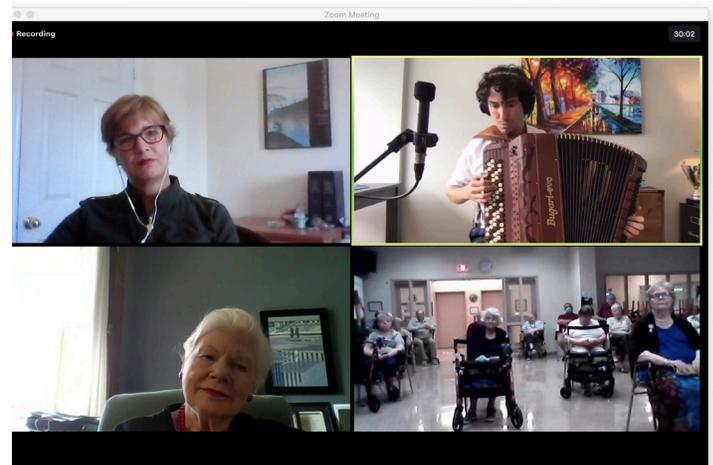
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stress I see is the lack of clarity about the endpoint and what it will look like. We can only stay in survival mode for so long. Yet intuitively we know it

will not be normal. How do we recover safely? We will be coexisting with the virus for some time. Will we be prepared?

My sincere hope is that we will not simply drift into a new normal. We have the opportunity to design and build a “better normal”. A reset if you like. To steer a new course away from the status quo. Can we main-

tain the momentum of lessons learned and avoid collective amnesia? Will it be a green recovery? Will we create the conditions for sustainability and resilience? Will we be bold and ambitious? Can we find a safe space for thoughtful and respectful conversations?



Throughout August and September 2020, the Lieutenant Governor joined the organization Concerts in Care to bring music into numerous long-term care homes and hear first-hand accounts of seniors across the province.

The Quarter Century Club brings together those who have devoted their skills and abilities, time and energy to serving the public during times of prosperity and challenge. Perhaps the observations I have made are not at all new to you. Your insights are needed now as never before. The world has been turned on its head. We are surely being tested. I thank you in advance for continuing to meet both the challenges of today and tomorrow.

I approach this time of vulnerability and vigilance with a spirit of humility, aspiration, and optimism. Everyone’s voices and visions are needed. For it is together that we will save lives and livelihoods.