

COMMENT

FEDERAL POLITICS



CHANTAL HÉBERT

Liberals playing the long game

‘Slow and steady’ is the theme six months into their mandate

If one had to describe the mode of Justin Trudeau's government six months into its first mandate, it would be cruise control rather than full throttle.

Whether by design or by necessity the Liberals are dealing with a heavy policy agenda by pacing themselves.

In this fashion, 180 days after the swearing-in of a new cabinet, Canada is no closer to an actual plan to reconcile its energy and climate change ambitions.

A promised inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women has yet to be launched and a larger road map is still work in progress.

If there are concrete changes in the offing on the fronts of medicare and/or public pensions, to name just two national programs that have not kept up with the times, they have yet to find their way on the public radar.

For all the talk of the government on gender parity and family/work balance it has yet to translate into measures that extend beyond the Parliament Hill bubble and those fortunate enough to toil within it.

Marijuana is still an illegal substance whose consumption is a criminal offence, with the status of offenders unclear given the Liberal intention to legalize weed.

From one week to the next, the government's promise to set up a process designed to lead to a different electoral system in time for the next election has been shovelled forward.

The security overhaul undertaken by the Conservatives through Bill C-59 remains in place.

A new Senate appointment process has yet to yield more than a handful of bodies to refill the upper house.

This is not an exhaustive list.

Some of the above is normal. There is no magic formula to make up for a lost decade on climate change in a country whose economy is partly dependent on the success of its energy industry.

Raising the living conditions of Canada's indigenous population to an acceptable level will take years, not months.

But the pace — glacial in so many instances — at which other files are progressing is of the government's own setting.

Not that Canadians seem to mind. More voters are satisfied with the government than the proportion of the electorate that actually supported the Liberals last fall. Perhaps as importantly, appreciation for Trudeau's handling of his new role is high across the country and among all age groups.

That's quite a departure from the last Conservative mandate when Stephen Harper's team routinely managed to do little more than keep the party base happy.

So far the Liberals have avoided some of the mishaps that have often attended the early days of past rookie governments, mishaps that have often resulted in an early loss of public confidence.

It also helps that Trudeau has so far asked little of Canadians beyond their patience. For his government, the hard-to-sell trade-offs are still down the road.

At the same juncture in his first mandate, Jean Chrétien was already scrambling to adjust the Liberal promises to the realities of a runaway deficit. Paul Martin never had time to find his policy bearings. He spent his minority mandate trying to dig himself out of the sponsorship scandal. Harper's overriding priority during his first months in office was ensuring the survival of a fragile minority government long enough to successfully seek re-election.

By comparison to his three immediate predecessors, Trudeau has enjoyed the gift of a leisurely landing and he has been making the most of it. And that probably speaks not just to short-term caution but also to the political assumptions of the Liberal government.

For if one had to name one distinguishing feature that has come to light over the past six months, it would not be the marketing flair of the Trudeau team or the so-called sunnier ways of the new prime minister. Both were in evidence over the last campaign and they contributed to the Liberal majority victory.

More striking is how comfortable this incoming government seems with playing the long game. It should be clear by now that Trudeau is setting a policy course that stretches over two mandates. His government is operating on a 10-year plan in all but name.

Time will tell whether that is good governance or just presumptions of the enduring goodwill of voters.

Chantal Hébert's national affairs column appears in Metroland newspapers.

MAYOR'S INITIATIVE

Why Skelly, Ferguson oppose \$50M poverty plan

Council duo cast the dissenting votes, citing lack of detail and unanswered questions



ANDREW DRESCHTEL

The Hamilton Spectator

Of the 13 members of council who were present, it backed Mayor Fred Eisenberger's unique proposal to spend \$50 million on social housing and poverty reduction programs.

Donna Skelly and Lloyd Ferguson cast the only opposing votes.

The duo didn't just go against the political grain, they did it in the face of a gallery packed with anti-poverty advocates and jumping with the feel-good energy of a community pulling together.

Why? Here's the view from their side of the hill.

Both Ferguson from Ancaster and the newly elected Skelly from the central Mountain expressed sympathy for the vulnerable and poor. But they had too many concerns to go along with what Eisenberger called a "worthy investment" in "human infrastructure."

Ferguson bolstered his reservations with the kind of uncomfortable questions that will no doubt resonate with some taxpayers. More on that in a moment.

In general, Skelly and Ferguson believe the city is putting the cart before the horse by committing council to spend \$50 million before staff have developed a detailed

report on how it should be spent. They say the report should come first, the vote second.

Right now, the plan is to spend \$3 million a year over 10 years on as-yet-unspecified poverty reduction programs and \$20 million on social housing. The money is to come from anticipated dividends from the Horizon Utilities merger and the delayed payback of existing city loans from the Future Fund.

Skelly argues there hasn't been enough information or time to give the idea the attention it needs since Eisenberger raised it two weeks ago. She also doesn't agree with putting so much new money into social housing when mental health support services are desperate for help.

In an interview, Skelly noted Eisenberger himself acknowledged we haven't moved the needle on poverty rates after more than a decade of trying. "So why are we throwing this amount of money at the same groups if we're not making a dent in the problem?"

Yes, she knows some will surely brand her a right-winger. But she thinks it's irresponsible to throw big tax dollars in such a hasty fashion at problems that are rightly provincial matters.

For his part, Ferguson said right now the city is already spending \$105 million on social housing, over half coming from the tax levy. He said between enhancements and the operating and capital budgets, it added about \$9 million more for 2016. Eisenberger's plan means another \$20 million on top.

Ferguson said he regularly hears from

his constituents about the 6,000 or so families and individuals who are on the waiting list for social housing in Hamilton. It's terrible and needs to be addressed, he said. But so do other issues.

For instance, what happens to social housing tenants who misuse the units the city provides them?

Ferguson noted he spent his previous council term as board treasurer for City-Housing Hamilton, the city corporation that operates about 6,000 social housing units.

During that time he saw lots of photographs of units that couldn't be fixed because "they were so badly trashed."

"The kitchen cupboards were ripped out. The fixtures were gone. The bathroom fixtures were pulled out. So what's the consequences if someone does that?"

Ferguson said staff tell him it's hard to get money for damage from poor people. So why doesn't the city have a database of the names of those responsible so they can't just walk back into another unit?

He said the city needs to make sure that those who really need the units get them not someone who's "going to come in and have parties and wreck the place."

The anti-poverty plan is a "great initiative," Ferguson said, but there are too many unanswered questions. Properly, where he and Skelly are coming from is not one of them.

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REFUGEE CRISIS

The unknown boy and hope in dark places

Desperate refugees gather in Athens, hoping the world will come to their aid



THOMAS FROESE

ATHENS — I'll never forget the unknown boy and his horrible end, not any more than I'll forget Arash and his eyes on the day we met when the waters of the Mediterranean were cold.

I call him the unknown boy because I know nothing about him, not his name or where he's from or anything else.

What I know about Arash is that he's a 15-year-old Afghan with no home and no father. I also know that nobody in Arash's family knows what's next or where to turn.

We're in Victoria Square, between the cigarettes and magazines and smell of grilled lamb. Children play. Women sit on benches and talk. Men loiter. They're all refugees hoping beyond hope to somehow still move on.

I've walked into the picture as a stranger. Arash approaches me. "Are you media?" He's kind with broken English and a neat appearance that surprises me. "What are they saying? Who will help us?" He pleads with me. "Please, tell Canada about us, please."

Arash has two sisters and two brothers. The brothers approach me. Rawish, 11, wants to be an engineer; Daryoosh, 5, a doctor. Daryoosh, who's about the age of the unknown boy, wears a paper crown on his head, like he's a king in some other world.

In recent months, thousands of refugees have poured through this square. They've slept in nearby tents and eaten rice and biscuits from kind locals. Many have found their way into the rest of Europe, but refugees that are left here now fear deportation.

Greece's northern borders have closed while the EU establishes its next move in



PHOTO BY THOMAS FROESE

An Afghan refugee named Arash, 15, and his two brothers, Rawish, 11 (left) and Daryoosh, 5, (right), in Victoria Square, Athens, Greece, a popular meeting point for refugees. Those with money can do business with smuggling operations behind the scenes at the square.

the crisis. In the past year, well over a million people — mostly Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans — have escaped their dangerous homelands, using Greece as their entry-point to Europe.

More than 4,000 have perished while simply crossing waters, often in overfilled boats, to Greek islands like Lesbos, the island where Pope Francis recently rescued 12 Syrians and brought them to Rome. It was a symbolic gesture and appeal for others — especially Christians — to still help.

Behind the doors and curtains of shops here, business is carried out, the business of getting forged papers and smuggling routes and guides. One smuggler reportedly owns an entire floor of apartments around Victoria Square, accommodations as part of his service.

Getting to Italy on truck, hiding between the fruit, reportedly costs 1,200 euros. Switzerland or Germany, via the Balkans by foot and car, 2,000 euros. Norway or Sweden, 2,500 euros. Truck to Germany, by far the most open and popular country, 2,500 euros. Plane to Germany, Norway or Sweden, 3,500 to 5,000 euros. Plane all the way to Canada, 14,000 euros.

Arash's family has nothing. His father, a solar engineer, was kidnapped by the Taliban seven months ago. He may be as dead as the unknown boy. Arash now worries for his mother. She's not well, "he tells me. "I've lost my father. I can't lose my mother too."

The unknown boy is a boy I recently saw on a video of ISIL atrocities. There he is, this boy, crying uncontrollably. He's being held by a man on a blood-soaked dock at some unknown water's edge. There's a second man. The first man throws the boy into the air. The second man shoots him in the head. The unknown boy is likely dead before he hits the water.

It's near Athens where I watch the clip with hundreds of other people. There's video of more murders, all horrible. The group later responds in prayer, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

I don't know what forgiveness Arash might think of one day for the men who took his father. We talk more. He wants to keep in touch. He wants a link. He wants hope. "Please help us," he repeats. His eyes water up.

I don't know what to say, how to help, where to start. We share our co-ordinates. "Don't lose hope," is all I can muster, because you can live without many things, but you can't live without hope.

Arash's eyes well up more, like the sea. But he doesn't cry. His father, it seems to me, has somehow used up all his tears for him.

Thomas Froese writes about news, travel and life. Find him at www.thomasfroese.com and www.dailylad.net

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