

“POLITICALLY SPEAKING”

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GET INVOLVED!

I have just returned from one of the highlights of my year, the annual Couchiching Conference on public affairs. For the far-too-many-of-you who have never heard of it, this was its **80th** anniversary (yes, 80 years!); and it is as strong, and as important to public discourse and public policy as ever. (For information on the conference and for videos of some of the sessions, see <http://www.couch.ca>).

Each year the Conference tackles a different theme, with various speakers, experts, and a wonderful diversity of participants in the discussions. This year's topic was ***“From the Ground Up: Civic Engagement in Our Time”***. The three days were fun, interesting – and hugely inspiring.

The Couchiching Institute on Public Affairs is the longest-running non-partisan public affairs forum in Canada, and I have been a Conference attendee for many years. I was first introduced to it by my mum, who herself attended many times and always encouraged policy discussions. (Full disclosure of bias – I have in years past served on both the Board of Directors and on the Executive of The Couchiching Institute on Public Affairs, and I am thrilled to have, this summer, been re-elected to both, and to have been named as Conference Chair for 2012 – more on that in another column.)

Because I was so inspired by some of the speakers, participants and discussions with regard to civic engagement, I am unabashedly using this space TO ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO GET INVOLVED. I don't mean from a partisan

political sense. Indeed, I know that many people are turned off by “politics”, especially party politics. I am, instead, encouraging as many of you as possible to become engaged, to get involved in your community – or in any one of your ‘communities’, because a ‘community’ can be geographic, ethnic, linguistic, age-based, your facebook friends, or anything else that groups people together. I encourage you to get involved by doing something that helps others or otherwise makes the community better. You can do this in so many different ways: by helping seniors who have difficulty getting out to the library or to do their shopping; by making your voice heard at Toronto City Hall meetings about garbage, or parks, or public transit, or anything else that you think is important for Toronto (yes, you CAN go, and speak, and be heard); by joining a group that helps clean the environment in your area; by helping new immigrants, perhaps with English or about other aspects of our city; by helping learning-disabled kids to read; by volunteering at a local food bank – the opportunities for getting involved are almost endless. But change for the better doesn’t just happen by accident – we need YOU. So if you see a need in your community, take the initiative, find out who you can join to help out. There are all sorts of groups and organizations doing things for and in our various communities that would love more help, more volunteers. Look in the local paper or go online and search them out – you’ll be amazed at what you can find and the things that you can get involved with. And if you don’t see anyone else stepping up to address a problem you’ve noticed, organize a group yourself to fill that need. It doesn’t have to be a lot – but large or small, you can only make a difference if, as the ad says, you “just do it”.

Each year there are wonderful and inspiring speakers at the Conference – social activists, media personalities, politicians, business people, artists -- but I encourage you, in particular, to learn more about Naheed Nenshi, the mayor of Calgary <http://www.calgarymayor.ca/> He is a wonderful example of someone who saw lots of ways to make Calgary a better city, got involved, was active in

his community, made his voice heard, and is now, as mayor, turning some of those ideas into reality. It all starts somewhere, but it takes individuals who simply say, "I want to make something better." You can too.

As always, your comments, thoughts and questions are welcome at info@marthahallfindlay.ca

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