

OPINION

Wanted: a white knight to save City Hall

What this city needs right now is a deep-pocketed benefactor with \$2.5 million to spare.

That's about the only way we're going to get city council to change its mind about using concrete instead of premium limestone to replace the original marble curtain walls of City Hall.

You know the score.

After years of neglected maintenance, the hall is undergoing a top-to-bottom reno expected to cost as much as \$74 million.

That includes replacing the worn-out 3,000 marble slabs on the exterior.

Anyone with a clue knows this tapped-out town can't afford to spend up to \$8 million to stick real marble back on the 1960 landmark, designated a heritage building in 2005.

And so the debate centres on using a lookalike material, either tasteful and expensive limestone or utilitarian and affordable concrete, a difference of \$2.5 million.



ANDREW DRESCHEL

Council recently voted 10-4 in favour of concrete, a decision that last week saw the heritage architects working on the project resign in protest.

But this wasn't an easy decision for councillors, a fact reflected in the thoughtful exchanges that preceded the show of hands.

Sam Merulla set the stage with a snappy overview of the decades of neglect City Hall has suffered and how the endless debate over whether to restore or build a new one has driven costs up.

"We're becoming notorious for

dragging things on," he said.

Merulla's support for "prudent fiscal reality" was picked up and then stretched by Terry Whitehead, who argued concrete actually symbolizes the resilience of Hamiltonians and sends a message to the world that we've chosen not to live beyond our means.

Brian McHattie pushed back, noting that concrete undermines council's moral authority when it comes to dictating heritage preservation to other landowners.

He pointed out limestone is closer to marble in appearance, it shines like marble, and it gets whiter over time. By contrast, concrete attracts dirt and fades to grey.

There's a time to save money and a time to take the long view and limestone is better in the long run, McHattie argued.

No, affordability is the key to guiding this project, responded Chad Collins. The savings on the table are too great to be ignored.

Carrying on his tradition of sav-

ing his best speeches for losing causes, Mayor Fred Eisenberger forcefully argued that this is about pride and image, that concrete is for sidewalks, not the face of a signature civic building.

Scathingly noting that councillors found \$8 million for "pet projects" last year, Eisenberger challenged them to find the money for limestone.

Lloyd Ferguson, the cost-conscious chair of the renovations committee, admitted he'd lost a couple of nights sleep wrestling with the question. But he still came down solidly in favour of concrete.

Stressing there were no other changes to the heritage aspects of the building, Ferguson maintained the untrained eye won't see any difference from limestone because of the vast improvements in concrete over the years.

In the end, the wisest words probably came from Bernie Morelli.

First, he rightly noted that once real marble slid off the table,

all bets we're off.

Next, Morelli pointed out that concrete is like any other material, it has to be maintained.

That brought the discussion back full circle to Merulla's starting point about paying the price for decades of neglected upkeep.

Will future councils do the necessary servicing and repairs or will they, like their predecessors, put them off until the roof starts caving in again?

The realistic fear is one of these days we're going to look up at our renovated City Hall and see a discoloured and soiled concrete facade, a tear-stained testament to hard times and fiscal responsibility.

Unless, of course, a monied white knight arrives to save us from ourselves.

Andrew Dreschel's commentary appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.
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Africans are caught up in Obama's hope

In Uganda, they're inspired by his ethnic background and message of unity

BY THOMAS FROESE

KAMPALA, Uganda ♦ So you think you feel good about what unfolded south of Canada's border on Nov. 4?

You should see the party in Africa.

There has been dancing in the streets, public holidays and general high-fives from nationals to diplomats to expatriates, all convinced that, as one Ugandan paper put it, "America is reborn."

It was just past eight in the morning on Nov. 5, at a recreation club here in Uganda's capital, when I was awakened to this new world we're apparently in. A smiling woman walked past and said to me, "Congratulations on your new president!"

She was gone before I could explain that I'm, in fact, a Canadian from Hamilton, Ont. Plenty of folks have seen me in my Canada T-shirts to prove it.

But then, why bother? For the first time in seven years as a Canadian living abroad, I wasn't embarrassed to be mistaken for a Yank.

In fact, next time it happens, I'm ready to say: "Why, thank you. Please drop by my family's Rhode Island beach house when you can." Or, since my family has no such house, maybe a "Yes we can," or at least a gentle "God bless America."

So it was there between the treadmills and cross-trainers, amid a cacophony of workout sounds, where I joined a misty-eyed, black-and-white crowd looking up at Barack Obama give his acceptance speech, live, just past midnight in Grant Park, Chicago, like it was the Second Coming.



AXELLE DE RUSSE, ABACAPRESS.COM

A man celebrates in Kogelo, Kenya, the village of Barack Obama's father, after Obama's election as president.

My so-called new president spoke of service and community with an unusual energy and sense of history. It was as if he had found a lost piece of America's soul and took it out of its box to be admired by the rest of the world: a world that, according to the Ugandan papers, would have voted 90 per cent for him.

Yes, our troubled planet is caught in the Obama Story, confirming, if nothing else, that politics is never just about issues but

perceptions and characters, about stories and dreams.

Africans — who have among the most difficult stories of any on Earth — particularly feel a new identity. Because if my Kenyan neighbour's son or grandson or nephew can rise to the world's highest political office, then ... well, you know how that finishes.

Others also connect with Obama because his is a multi-faceted narrative of a child of the world. As put by one commentator from

northern Uganda, where rebel war has devastated a generation, "America needed a leader with a multi-social, multicultural religion, and multiracial background."

Now many Africans pin their hopes on the U.S. holding certain African rogue leaders and rebels to higher accountability. They also expect more policies promoting trade and development and health care, such as for AIDS, building on what Bill Clinton started and George W. Bush continued.

I can partly relate to this new identity that Africans sense. It's like the peculiar kinship I feel with anything to do with John F. Kennedy because of JFK's insistence on saving a politically and militarily besieged Berlin, my native city. Realistically or not, the linkage makes me believe I'm that much more connected to that era, to the Kennedy story in general, and to an entire host of ideals and freedoms.

In fact, as I stood with those Africans on that Nov. 5 morning, it was like the ghost of JFK, if not Martin Luther King, hovered about. Obama's address clearly tapped into the great truths shared by these men: that we are more than just a collection of individuals, but part of a larger, inter-related drama. No man is an island. For better or worse, we all impact each other, sometimes very profoundly.

It's not a bad thing, connecting to these kinds of stories and dreams. But it's still an incomplete picture.

Because even a superstar who plays with intelligence and giftedness, with grace and humility, depends on the team around him. And the Stanley Cup simply won't come every year.

So when the party ends and the ghosts disappear, when the load becomes heavy and the road long, that's when we'll know that even hope — as true and worthwhile and audacious as it is — has a cost.

Thomas Froese is a part-time Hamiltonian who lives in Uganda most of the year. E-mail thomasfroese@thomasfroese.com. His book, 99 Windows, is available through thomasfroese.com.

Can Horwath catch history's wave?

QUEEN'S PARK ♦ The field looks set for the Ontario NDP leadership race to be decided in March in Hamilton. So, today, some early handicapping of the contenders to succeed outgoing boss Howard Hampton after his dozen years on the job.

If the entries appear, at first blush, unlikely to inspire anything like Obama-mania, it's worth recalling the underwhelming prospects of folks such as David Peterson, Mike Harris and Dalton McGuinty when they first ascended to the top jobs of parties in the wilderness.

The most experienced of the NDP contenders is Gilles Bisson, veteran member from Timmins-James Bay. And it's in that biographical clause that his fatal vulnerabilities are probably found.

It's unlikely the party will be looking to replace one leader from the North with another. If Hampton, who represented Kenora-Rainy River, never seemed wholly comfortable in urban Ontario, it's doubtful Bisson, who flies his own plane around a riding so vast it reaches to James Bay, will fit that bill, either.

Though still only 51, the voluble



JIM COYLE

former electrician and union rep also dates to Bob Rae's government in 1990. His profile was low then, so the stigma is minimal. But it remains awkward baggage at a time seemingly crying out for generational change.

Both candidates from Toronto, Peter Tabuns from Toronto-Danforth and Michael Prue in Beaches-East York, are experienced, knowledgeable, articulate — but, if anything, probably a little too downtown Toronto and a touch too familiar.

Sometimes, as would-be leaders elsewhere recently discovered, experience does not always trump enthusiasm.

To be sure, Tabuns, a former deputy mayor of Toronto and former head of Greenpeace Canada who won a 2006 byelection, is

probably on the money when he talks of his green agenda and the need to focus on the new energy economy.

Unhappily, another chap singing from the same unimpeachable hymn book found recently at the federal level that it's not electorally easy being green.

Likewise, Prue has impeccable credentials and, with his anti-poverty leadership and compelling personal story of the demoralizing effects of growing up poor in Regent Park, is forceful and fluent on a major issue of the time.

But he is a career politician, elected eight times, was mayor of a city — East York — that no longer exists.

In their compartment and commitment, Tabuns and Prue both bring honour to public service. But with both 60 or older by the time of the next election, neither would seem to be poster boy for a job of renewal unlikely to be completed in a single election.

Which leaves Andrea Horwath from Hamilton Centre.

If there's something transformational in the air as a black man is sworn in as president, if it's time for those excluded to be engaged, Horwath might just have caught

history's wave.

In a place that's still overwhelmingly white, male and boomerish, she remains, at 45, a comparatively fresh face in the legislature.

Since she's obviously of a different sex from her rivals, she also conveys the sense of being from a different generation.

Even so, no one grows up in Hamilton politics, as Horwath did through three terms on city council, without developing a skin thick enough and nose hard enough for the game.

In retaking for the NDP a seat

formerly held by the popular late Liberal Dominic Agostino, and getting the party over the hump back to official status, she made her bones.

It can hardly hurt, moreover, that she started out as a "community development co-ordinator" in a Hamilton legal clinic. Which sounds a lot like community organizer. And, as a trampoliner to higher things, everyone knows how that can work.

Jim Coyle writes on provincial affairs.

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