

Ex-Premier Kathleen Wynne explains why she's still in politics

Written By CONSTANCE SCRAFIELD

Former Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne says of Orangeville, 'It's really a fine place... I've been coming here for years, because my grandchildren live here.'

Interviewed in the private dining room at Montgomery Village Retirement Residence in Orangeville, where the management had offered us hospitality, the MPP for Don Valley West said the government, often referred to by the premier's name, 'is not just one person. There are another 123 members of the legislature.

'My responsibilities are to my constituents. People affected by cuts need to have their representative to protest and speak out. The election in 2018 was not so much about policies, as it was about getting rid of the Liberals. When they [the Progressive Conservatives] got in, there are realities we're facing as a society. Even federal Conservatives say they'd repeal the carbon tax when the science is so clear.'

She says that when policy changes begin to do more harm than good, the problem becomes who can sway a majority government.

'The reality is that there is very little a minority Opposition can do unless there is buy-in across lines. We make our statements; we bring in private member's bills. We debate in the legislature.

'There are people who come to me in my constituency office and they're very concerned about what they see, but they have to reach out to government people.

'I started down this path to politics,' she began, 'as a parent advocate and volunteer in the community. I was working part-time; I had my three kids, I was working on local education issues in Toronto and my experience was that I worked closely, at the time of the last Conservative government under Mike Harris, with the NDP and the Liberals to make the case about anti-amalgamation of the city, about education cuts. There were a number of issues and I really believe strongly that alliances between the community people and elected politicians are important, whether you're in government or not. It's the way to make good policies. But I also think it's the way you raise your voice in opposition to government policies.

'This government had a very rough first year and a bit; they were not able to follow through on so many things they tried to do because they were ill-considered, whether that be the cuts to autism funding or the cronyism of putting people in office that were friends.

'They really heard a lot of objections - the tone is different now, a little bit - but the priorities are not different because we're in the midst of labour unrest now, because the government didn't listen to experts, to teachers, to families, who were saying, 'We don't want our class sizes to be higher; we know that kids taking four courses online is not a good thing' but they didn't listen. So, I think that's of concern to all of us. Although the tone to me is slightly different, the priorities are the same.'

She said she also is 'very worried about the relationship between government and the indigenous community, because one of the first things this government did was putting the pens down on writing the curriculum, the indigenous curriculum, that we were in the process of writing and, now, I'm reading that the government is looking to have more political input - I won't say interference but more political input - into the appointment of judges.

'We have to be very careful that government doesn't intrude into the processes that are set up to be impartial - for instance, the last two people appointed to the human rights commission did not go through the process. Whether they are qualified or not is beside the point. They may very well be qualified - one is a police officer and the other is other an academic- but the point is that processes are set up to minimize political interference. And if you bypass those processes just because you can as the premier, then, in my opinion.

you dilute the democracy. You lose the objectivity.?

Striking a more personal note, we mentioned the Grandpals program that is run in Orangeville with some of the elementary schools and celebrated at the Montgomery Village Retirement Residence.

Ms. Wynne had certainly heard of it: ?I love it,? she declared. ?My granddaughter is in grade five and she participated last year and she loves it and I just think it's such an exciting and brilliant program. My eldest grandchild did it this year and I really hope that the other two have an opportunity too.

?I really think it's the kind of innovative educational strategy that is valuable ? it's valuable for the kids but it's also valuable for the community. It's a way of connecting generations. As a society we've decided that we're going to divide ourselves by age ? there are very few places where generations mix. It was nice at church where people of all ages were there when my children were little.?

She said she is in Orangeville once a week ?and Jane, my partner and I hang out in the playground with the other parents and it's so nice. Jane ? she is my rock.?

As to staying in politics ? ?I've made a commitment. So, I'm going to stay and serve my constituency. I can't say beyond the next election but what I am going to do is stay involved, whether it's in electoral politics or in other ways, I will stay involved in the community ? there's so much to be done.?

She added, ?I feel like I've moved into a phase of my career where I want to answer people's questions. So, if kids, particularly young people, I spend a fair amount of time speaking to different classes, whether it's political science classes or women in politics classes or leadership, young people have a lot of questions and they're worried ... about the future and I really feel that it's my responsibility to share my experience and to convey that, whatever setbacks [there are], it's so worth it to try to move the bar, very much worth it.

We asked if she has ambitions.

?I do,? she replied. ?I don't know specifically what they are ? any more than when I was 30 that I knew I was going to be in the legislature when I was 50, but I do feel an obligation to use my experience and put myself in positions where I can be helpful ? that is what the next year and bit will be about ? what I can figure out.?

?Right now, I'm still doing constituency work- I'm bringing in a private member's bill on fetal alcohol syndrome disorder [FASD]. We brought in an alcohol strategy in the last year or so of our term - and part of that was fetal alcohol syndrome too, to improve awareness.

?I'm adding to that, that would require that teachers in training, early childhood educators in training and boards should have policies in place to increase the awareness of the symptoms and the strategies for helping kids with FASD. There's no cure for FASD? but helping mothers stop drinking was part of the alcohol strategy.

?We're in the midst of loosening our alcohol laws, drinking in parks and so forth. Even when we moved to allow beer and wine in grocery stores, I questioned the accessibility. We were going to do some work to raise awareness ? we talk so much about the dangers of smoking but we don't talk about the dangers of alcohol. There are a lot of cultural issues too. Here in Ontario there was a time of dryness ? no alcohol ? and that may contribute to the problems now.

As for the province, ?I just hope for us to be able to realize our potential ? honestly, we are a creative, talented, hard working people and I've been to every corner of the province. We have such an advantage in the province of our educated work force ? we are resource-rich and we are rich in innovative capacity, but I hope that we can once again start building, not this tearing down. Parties of all stripes have built this province by working with municipal governments, not fighting with them.

?When I was premier, I travelled [to Asia, the Middle East, Japan], I met with people who wanted to invest in Ontario but also they wanted to partner with post-secondary education institutions here because we have such fine minds and they wanted to develop technology. They wanted to know about our water technology because after Walkerton this province invested in water infrastructure, to develop water strategies; we have some of the best water purification strategies in the world.

As the interview neared an end, she asked, ?Can I say something nice about Orangeville?

?I have to say what a pleasure it's been to get to know the community a bit more. I think that the main street has been preserved beautifully and the other thing is that, as I watch my daughter and her partner raising her kids here, it ?s such a good place for kids to be ? they're close to nature; they are able to be independent.

?It's just a very, very healthy place for my grandkids to be. Lots of activities: my grandson plays baseball; my middle grandchild is in Brownies. My eldest plays basketball. They're happy in their community; it's really a fine town. I've enjoyed getting to know it.?

She added, ?I hope that people who feel worried about some of the things that have happened will go to see their local representative. You have Sylvia Jones here.?

We mentioned that Ms. Jones has moved her office to the third floor of an office building at 180 Broadway in Orangeville, so there will be no more climate protesting students on the front lawn at her previous space at 244 Broadway.

?She's been in that house on Broadway for years,? commented Ms. Wynne. ?When I was an activist, we just kept going back. You have to be persistent. People need to hold politicians' feet to the fire. There were a couple of incidents in my own government. Our MPPs were shying away and I just shut that down.?

She says MPPs' duty ?is to meet with our constituents. That is our number one job.?