



Martin Regg Cohn

Onley presents food for thought

Alarmed by a toxic political environment, Lieutenant-Governor David Onley is hoping MPPs will put some water in their Ontario wine.

For the first time, he is holding a private dinner in the formal vice-regal suite at Queen's Park to lower the political temperature for all three parties. Over turkey breast and beet salad — local food and wine only — he will prod rival MPPs into making politics more palatable for the public.

After six years as the Queen's representative here, Onley fears the bitter divide in the legislature is turning off the voting public. As the sniping increases, voter turnout decreases.

In an unusually candid vice-regal interview, he fretted about the last provincial election, when fewer than half of all eligible voters bothered to cast a ballot.

"It should be a concern to all of us," Onley mused.

"I don't think there's a 10-step blueprint to everyone being nicer with each other, and that therefore

people are going to always be talking policy."

As an impartial lieutenant-governor, his role is to remain above politics. But Onley doesn't intend to remain passive about the decline in political discourse.

"I understand partisan politics — you've got to try to exploit your opponents' weaknesses," he said. "But I think it can be done in a way that's heavier on policy than it is on personality, and I think that's one of the ingredients that would lead to a greater respect for the system."

After nearly two years of minority government, all three parties remain on a perpetual election footing — and partisan tensions are boiling over. Procedural wrangling and point-scoring have slowed the legislative agenda to a crawl, alienating much of the public.

Premier Kathleen Wynne warned this week that the province could face an autumn election if the three parties can't co-operate. Tory Leader Tim Hudak countered by publicly challenging her to call a vote.

The two leaders met privately, but inconclusively, on Wednesday afternoon — failing once again to make any headway on their conflicting agendas, sources say. Hudak brought in his own wish list for major economic reforms and a judicial inquiry into the costly cancellation of gas plants, while Wynne sought common ground on less contentious issues such as a Local Food Act and cellphone regulations (NDP Leader Andrea Horwath has not yet responded to Wynne's latest

invitation to meet).

Mindful of those chasms, Onley set out over the summer months to bring the leaders and their MPPs together in the same room for dinner and drinks. It had never been done before in Ontario or federally.

All three leaders gave their blessings, but only one of them — the premier — is scheduled to attend Monday's supper. Hudak came by for tea in the lieutenant-governor's office to offer his support, but later backed out over a scheduling conflict, as did Horwath.

Onley then extended the invitation to all MPPs, so that members from across the aisle could cross party lines over a standup supper. He is not under any illusions about spreading concord among political antagonists, nor is he trying to snuff out passionate debate. But he holds out hope that if opposing politicians can socialize in person, they'll be less personal in the legislature.

"I know this may sound naive, but when you know somebody personally... it's a little bit harder to keep a mean-spirited or personal attack," Onley said. "I think there can still be hard, honest disagreement on policy without it being... personal."

The dinner is timed to coincide with the International Day of Democracy this Sunday, and the return of MPPs to the legislature this week. Onley will welcome them in the formal music room, where imposing portraits of his vice-regal predecessors hang from the walls, staring down at visitors.

Former House of Commons



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

The Honourable David C. Onley is holding a private dinner in the vice-regal suite at Queen's Park to lower the political temperature for all three parties.

speaker Peter Milliken will talk about co-habitation in a minority parliament. The lieutenant-governor will air his concerns about lower voter turnouts and declining political civility.

His argument: At a time when people overseas are "striving for some semblance of democracy, some semblance of the freedoms we

have," Ontarians cannot take the vote for granted.

Nor, it must be said, should his dinner rivals take voters for granted by turning them off with partisan rancour.

Martin Regg Cohn's provincial affairs column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. mcohn@thestar.ca, Twitter: @reggcohn