

Air Quality and Politics, Clive Doucet¹, *Presentation to CACOR, 2015 January 14*

Ottawa is a very insular, comfortable city. By international urban standards, it's clean and blessed with a magnificent natural environment at the confluence of three large rivers. The largest, the Ottawa moves more fresh water than the Rhine, the Seine and the Thames Rivers combined. People still fish in it and we only have about 500 people who die annually of emphysema, asthmas and other conditions related to poor quality.

Deaths related to air quality are rarely news items. A girl or boy dying in a hospital bed, unable to breathe has little drama to it. Most people would be surprised to hear 500 people die in Ottawa because of noxious gases and particulate loads that air quality obliges all human being to tolerate. I am sure the thought that most people have around air quality is that it is what it is and not possible to change. Not true. We can choose to live otherwise, but it's not an easy choice because it requires many things that are not directly associated with the issue of air quality; things such as the politicians we chose to elect, knowledge, public debate and political action.

As an example of how we can do things differently to create cleaner air, I will begin with the years between 1997 and 2009 when Ottawa City Council began to wake up to the problem of air quality and more importantly to do something about it. In 1997, I was a brand new Regional councillor, just elected. But before I had time to open my office at City Hall, eastern North America was struck by the largest weather disaster that the nation has ever seen. A six day ice storm closed down cities from Eastern Ontario all the way to Nova Scotia, through New York State and Vermont. The heart of the storm was the black triangle that went from Ottawa to Kingston and east to Montreal. Large sections of our city had no electrical power. Montreal came close to losing its ability to pump potable water and sewage and once that happens you have lines of refugees on the road. Stores closed because no city today has more than three days supply of food in its malls. The army was mobilized and we moved into emergency response mode. Ultimately there was

about 5 billion dollars in insurance claims. The largest North America has ever seen.

As you can see from the city today, we survived, but it was wake up call to our city that climate change was arrived and we had to start paying attention.

The new Regional Chair, Bob Chiarelli, called a Smart City Summit and for two days our new council heard from some of the best urban thinkers in the world. They either came to Ottawa to speak or were teleported in on a large screen to the council chamber. Out of that Smart City Summit came a new commitment to a greener more, sustainable city.

We started by buying and converting an old freight line into a short 8 kilometre city electric rail service to test to see if reintroducing surface electric rail would work. It did. Its ridership exceeded expectations from the beginning and continues to do so. This was followed by an international competition for a city wide surface light rail system and in 2006, the first contract was signed to begin construction of a North-South line from the distant suburbs to the city centre.

What does all this have with air quality? Well, Ottawa is a white collar town, there is very little heavy industry. Most of our pollution comes from the very ordinary needs of life, heating and cooling homes and driving our cars. The largest single polluter is the 417 expressway which goes through the centre of our city, not far from here. Just the north south electric line alone would have reduced carbon emissions by 26,000 tons annually.

Unfortunately, like many mid sized North American cities, there is no redundancy built into Ottawa landscape. 98 percent of our transit and transportation is dependent on the gasoline or the diesel engine and each year that dependency increases. In spite of billions spent on buses, 70 per cent of our population drive to and from work each day alone in a single vehicle and each year, the city builds a hundred kilometers of new roadway. Each year, because of land sprawl, the costs of supporting the roadway system and the associated costs have fewer people to support it

which often surprises people because the centre of the city is now carpeted with high rises, yet density of the city as a whole continues to decline. There are fewer people occupying more geography.

Part of the problem is that few people really understand what the interconnectedness of the issues being dealt with at City Hall. They tend to have their favourite issues and look at each problem city council tackles as a stand alone issue and it's not. They're all connected and they're connected by what happens around the council table. The Regional Chair and later Mayor Chiarelli understood this and we began to bring in governance reforms, a participatory budget where citizens had more time and capacity to influence the city's budget priorities. At the same time, we created 15 citizen advisory committee for everything from preservation of heritage buildings to the necessity of planting more urban trees and to air quality. These citizen committee were provided with a clerk to keep the minutes and give administrative support. Each elected committee of council acquired a volunteer group of professionals reading reports and presenting non-partisan positions on the best way forward. This could be contentious because they often didn't agree with the city's major lobby interests thoughts about the anticipated transition to light rail to the disposition of the city's parks to air quality and local food supply.

On the air quality side, prior to 1995, we were in lamentable shape. There were two monitors - one downtown near Queen and O'Connor, the other on Wurtemberg Street near the Rideau River. In 1995 as part of the cutbacks in the fed and provincial governments the Queen Street monitor was terminated. This was a significant loss as it was the only monitor we had that captured traffic emissions in a congested part of the city at rush hours. Both monitors were full sized permanent type ones with a broad range of pollutants measured including PM 2.5 and PM10, NO2.

You can't do much about air quality or any other issue if you don't have three things 1) research data 2) publication of the data and 3) public discussion of the data such that a consensus

for action can be built - and we had none of the above.

Then we got lucky, sometimes lightning does strike in a good way, in 1997-98 the satellite air quality project (funded by National Research Council to promote standardization of satellite data) resulted in an unprecedented increase in air quality observations from July 1 2007 to July 1 2008). The remote sensing mapping was done by a firm in Kanata to make use of a special air quality sensor available on the NASA AURA satellite which was able to refine the 10 km maps possible from raw data to approximately 1 km resolution. The city had never had data like this before, suddenly we could identify hot spots. Not all air quality is the same even in a city and for the very first time, we were able to tell residents what the quality of the air was like around their homes, around schools, around hospitals. We could identify hot spots. We could actually create a list of the top ten worst spots and the top ten best. This kind of information gives you the capacity to start building air quality policies that can change the city.

At the same time the city also acquired two "portable" monitors thanks to donations from the federal governments and to the City's Public Health Department. This included the loan of the very sophisticated air quality van owned by Environment Canada and the calibration of the ground monitors by Environment Canada labs. (Accurate calibration is a complex technical achievement and absolutely necessary for any successful air quality monitoring.)

The city's part in this was providing a project manager and their only specialist in air quality, Natty Urquizo who with help from a couple her colleagues won a well deserved award of excellence from the city. Her special skills were in networking and getting help/advice and significant support from DOT, MOE and the City of Gatineau without which the project would have been a bust. Natty was laid off by the city in the spring of 2013 as her position was declared redundant and air quality was downgraded, and she is now working for a consultant firm in Ottawa.

She was not alone. The sustainability focus that began to take place in Ottawa from the Smart Growth Summit between 1997 and 2006 began to collapse. In the election of 2006, the Mayor who had championed the light rail conversion was defeated and his project was cancelled at the cost of hundreds of millions of dollars in court costs, sunk costs and opportunity costs. It was replaced by a 4 kilometer rail tunnel. We will now bury the environmentally friendly transit at enormous cost and leave the buses on the surface.

Air quality reports were considered to be too divisive and there have been none published. Divisive means someone with money got hurt by them. What would happen to high rise land values if you found out that the corner of King Edward and Rideau for example is the dirtiest in the city? Or that a primary school was being located at the dirtiest suburban location possible?

A critical report by the consultant Senes on air quality and greenhouse gas conditions was never been made public - only an executive summary was presented to Committee. Suppressing information is a very useful political strategy. The federal government for example has been busy for years suppressing unwanted national statistical analysis, unwanted water and air quality research, unwanted governance capacity like the Law Reform Commission and Parliament itself through prorogation.

We have seen the same suppression at the local level. It's just smaller scale and harder to comprehend. It's very difficult for the public to understand the environmental and air quality significance of the loss of the north south LRT, let alone get upset about it, if the public never gets the chance to compare city wide surface light rail to the tunnel construction if they never see an environmental comparison. And it's impossible to get upset about the city's budget 3 billion dollar budget process if it is passed in thirty minutes or the impact of losing heritage landscapes and buildings if there is no citizen watch dog. We have now lost all those volunteer citizen watch dog committees.

It began in 2006 when Mayor Chiarelli lost the election and Mayor O'Brien was elected; that election was a watershed. Since then like a elastic band the city has bounced back to the polices of the pre 1997 order.

We live in a complex world. Our evening news is filled with stores of war, refugees, terrorist bombs, disasters of every kind and our own troubles flow out to grace the rooms of others. The world is preoccupied today with the murders of the Charlie Hebdo staff. A few weeks from now it will be something different. Everyone gets their turn on the global merry go round. Ottawa was on it just a few months ago when another man wanting to commit suicide shot a defenceless ceremonial guard at the war memorial. There have been many consequences of this global news reach. One of them is fragmentation and another is fear. Generally, it's made people fearful of issue oriented public debate and fragmented their capacity to engage in debate that might cause their own lives to change in useful but unexpected ways. Hence, the success of politicians and governments who's principal promise is to control anxiety by more security or even better to take society back to the days when things were not so complex.

Changing the urban environment from one that is dependent on big box, parking lot development patterns, the single occupant car and global supply systems to an urban environment such that less people die from poor air quality the hardest task on the planet because it requires a profound change in basic values and personal expectations. In this new world local food supplies would replace global umbilical cords, cities that are pedestrian oriented with mid rises instead of high rises over underground parking lots and lots of electric surface trams. There's very little glory or drama to these shifts.

It takes local focus and local research to understand why these things are a good idea and a public willingness to debate the issues when they are raised. All of this is immensely difficult in the 200 channel, iPad, iPod, iPhone, twitter, facebook universe where every day is a global day and governance itself has changed to one that defines itself not by how much it can connect with its

citizens but by how it can manipulate the news cycle.

The world we are in has already lasted longer than the Club of Rome expected but only by a couple of decades. It will change. The Berlin Wall didn't last forever and McCarthyism did not endure. We will come out of this destructive phase in our collective history because there will be no choice. The political, economic and society we have is not sustainable, not sustainable means it will not continue. One day, we will be forced to address the real problems which face us which are all about figuring out how to build a sustainable world that can get us to end of this century, not simply repeating the model that has created the problems.

It's my own thought that the day will come when deliberately obfuscating and limiting public debate around the research and public debate needed to address matters central to the continuation of our species will be considered a criminal act.

No one likes to lose. I certainly didn't like losing my run for Mayor of Ottawa, but there is a difference between losing and being defeated. I wasn't defeated. Nor were the people who worked so hard for a different vision for Ottawa in 2010. Nor were those men and women who 40 years ago signed the Club of Rome declaration which declared a finite world cannot support infinite growth.

The courage and importance of that statement by western political leaders has largely been forgotten, but one day this will change also. Just as one day, there will be a younger generation who will take up a vision for a more sustainable national capital - and they will prevail.

¹ Clive Doucet was the first poet elected to Ottawa City Councillor, in 1997. He is the author of "Urban Meltdown: Cities, Climate Change and Politics as Usual".