

Friday April 18th, 2019

*ATTN: DOUG FORD*  
*Premier of Ontario*  
*Legislative Building*  
*Queen's Park*  
*Toronto ON M7A 1A1*

*The Dinner Table*

Dear Mr. Ford,

Six years ago, I was a freshman at the University of McMaster, studying Political Science and Philosophy. These courses empowered me to think critically; develop my own opinions and cultivate an informed and empathetic perspective regarding our world's most complex challenges - even if those issues had no direct effect on people who look or live like me. Through in-class discussions and debates, alongside the research and application of persuasive rhetorical techniques within my academic essays, I tested my intellectual autonomy and learned to articulate my position. It was scary at first; I was nervous that my ideas were immature, or that they were too far-fetched. But as I tried, failed, and revised, I began to crave more of these opportunities. I saw, very clearly, that educating myself about an issue, claiming a stance and defending it, with verifiable proofs, was meaningful; it empowered me - not only as a student, but as an effective within the broader context of our increasingly globalized world. In direct contrast to these enlightening learning opportunities, holiday dinners with my extended family left me feeling frustrated. Why? Because when I would try to insert my opinion and thought into conversations, I was often told that I was, "too young to understand"; "one day [I] would see things differently"; "university and my professors were influencing [me] too much". What all these thoughtless dismissals of my intellectual and emotional capacity really meant was that, merely because of my age, I was deemed as being incapable of formulating meaningful and justified opinions. For a time, the mocking comments threatened to silence me. But as time progressed, so did my confidence.

Fast forward to 2019: my family sits around the dinner table and my younger brother and cousins are all participating in these "adult" conversations. Each of us have very different opinions - inclusive of strongly opposing political beliefs. These positions are all challenged, at times, by our older family members' "sage wisdom" that can only be gained through the experience that comes with age. We are *always* learning from the "adults" at the table, but today, there is something missing. What is missing is the condescending and patronizing belief that just because someone is not as advanced in age or lived experience it does not mean their thoughts are invalid or unworthy of being heard. So, perhaps, when I say something is missing what I really mean is that something has been gained that demonstrates an evolution in empathy, compassion and insight my family previously lacked. I am by no means claiming that I changed my family or their beliefs, but I am confident that my insistence on the validity of my perspective planted a seed that has since been nurtured by fruitful discussion and the vehemence of my younger relatives. This seed has now grown into space at the dinner table that allows for everyone to be heard, going beyond their comfort zones where perspectives can be challenged, shifted and validated. This space, full of new knowledge and understanding, has replaced the void created by paternalism and complacency.

Today, Mr. Ford, I want to invite you to sit at my dinner table. To be fair, I will caution you in advance that

the address listed on your invitation isn't that of my childhood home, but rather a public school in Ottawa. I would like to invite you to take a place at the table found in our staff room, where my school family and I eat, laugh, cry and celebrate each and every day. I am inviting you to this table for discussion, unimpeded by media or preconceived notions, where we will both be protected from the invasive glare of cameras or the falsity of pre-prepared speeches. Instead, I am hoping we will both be able to serve and indulge in meaningful conversations that will challenge two differently-minded individuals to discover compassion and open-mindedness within each other.

To preface our proverbial meal (caveat: I am happy to ensure there is actual non-rhetorical food there as well), I believe you are fighting for what you think is best for the people you represent. But, my hopefulness surrounding your intentions is not nearly as strong as my conviction that *I am too*; as an educator, lifelong learner, and globally-minded human being, I am advocating for and championing the best interests of the people your positions and policies are denying space to at our table. I believe you are trying to make changes that benefit others and foster growth, but *I am too*. You are trying to be an admirable leader for the people, and Mr. Ford, *I am too*. While we may share the same goals, it is becoming abundantly clear that we are trying to achieve them in very different ways for extremely different audiences. First and foremost, my people are my students. For them, I am trying to walk the walk, while talking the talk. I am eager to host conversations surrounding the significant challenges we're facing with the aim of sorting out the political, economic and social problems of cause and effect. I am hopeful you will accept my invitation to engage in productive dialogue with the people who are being directly affected by your policies - because they deserve a spot at your table and their voices will support you in your search for positive change. In order for society to grow, we need to plant seeds. More than that, we need to ensure these seeds are planted with pragmatism and reason, so their growth and fruit is strong, far-reaching and long lasting.

Should you choose to accept this invitation, I have prepared a personal letter, outlining my points of concern for you to read beforehand. To be clear, my intention in wanting to speak with you in person is not to cast blame, but to seek clarity, perspective and insight. I want to better understand your choices, rationale and thought process, while also offering my own. Just as I believe when engaging in family dinner conversations, the purpose of communicating ideas, opinions and beliefs is not for the sake of being right or wrong, but rather to cultivate empathy surrounding differing viewpoints, expand our capacity for compassion, and grow. My hope is that by inviting you to my dinner table, we can foster a space that reveals how we can both continue to operate from our core values, while also prioritizing the needs of not *your* people or *mine*, but of everyone you and I - in our separate, but seemingly similar positions - have sworn to support.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

With sincerity and hope,

Melissa Lyons

*Core French Teacher*

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