



Column / Don Newman

## Last Call at Hy's

Weekdays at lunch, the bar is crowded. The same is true at the cocktail hour after work. Weeknights in the dining room, there are few tables available. Suddenly, political Ottawa has rediscovered Hy's Steakhouse. It is like 1995 all over again. But nostalgia isn't what it used to be, and after more than 30 years during which it became a central part of what made Canada's capital tick, Hy's is closing its doors at the end of February for good.

Ironically, last call is coming just as a tightly controlled, closed mouthed and highly suspicious government is out of office after almost 10 years in power, being replaced by one that promises to be more open, more transparent and less secretive.

Whether Justin Trudeau and his Liberals can live up to that pledge remains to be seen. But it seems almost certain to be a government more open and less paranoid, ready for discussion and ideas, and less tightly controlled than certainly Stephen Harper and most of his Conservatives were.

Despite the prospect of *bonhomie*, Hy's won't be the place where it will happen. A dispute over a new lease, a drop-off in patronage during the almost 10 years of Conservative government, and two years of construction while an underground light rail station is built beneath the site has convinced Hy's ownership that continuing to operate is no longer viable.

The Harper years were hard on places like Hy's, where the main clientele has been politicians, journalists, lobbyists and members of political staffs of all parties. It has been a place to eat and drink, laugh and relax, and allow a convivial interaction among

people who are adversaries on paper, but who, when they get acquainted, find they can agree on many things, work cooperatively and make Canada a better place.

Every democracy's capital city has at least one Hy's. Usually more than one. In Washington, there is the Monocle on Capitol Hill, and the Old Ebbitt Grill on 15th Street, a block from the White House. In London, the House of Commons has eight bars right on the premises, and others nearby, where the division bells ring when members have to return for a vote. In Paris, the small network of streets behind the National Assembly are populated by cafés and bars, where it is rumoured many deputies do some of their best work.

The simple fact is that for democratic government to function properly there must be places where those involved in its many facets can meet together informally, get to know and trust each other, make agreements, celebrate successes and commiserate over their disappointments. And in Ottawa, Hy's has played that role since the late 1980s.

Since then, I have paid more visits to Hy's that I can accurately count. In fact I would bet that many of the writers in this edition of *Policy* could make the same claim, starting with the editor and publisher. But each of us would have our own favourite memories of experiences that could only have happened at Hy's.

One of mine is the night in 1991 when I was just finishing dinner with Paul Martin, who was then in opposition. My cell phone rang with a call from another source I didn't want Martin to know I was contacting – and whom I

did not want to know I was with Martin. I looked around the dining room, saw P.E.I. Premier Joe Ghiz, quickly parked Martin with him and went out in the hall to take the call.

That is the kind of thing that could only happen at Hy's.

The event that has become an annual fixture at Hy's is the budget night ritual. The management removes the furniture from the bar to accommodate everyone who wants to squeeze in. The dining room is packed and the private room at the back is crowded with members of the finance minister's staff, friends and colleagues.

Around 9.30 the minister arrives. He works through the bar, then the dining room. It is as though he had just scored the winning goal in the seventh game of the Stanley Cup finals. Finally after all the accolades, he disappears into the private room where he receives a standing ovation.

Now, unless Finance Minister Bill Morneau delivers an early budget before the end of February, Joe Oliver will be the last finance minister who received that kind of treatment at Hy's, after delivering his lone budget last April.

Morneau and finance ministers yet to come will no doubt get the same kind of treatment somewhere else in downtown Ottawa, in a restaurant close to Parliament Hill, the one that becomes the meeting place where the politicians and pundits go. It will be the new Hy's. It just won't be the same. **P**

*Don Newman is senior counsel at Navigator Ltd. and Ensign, Chairman of Canada 2020, and a lifetime member of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery. [donnewman.dnn@bell.net](mailto:donnewman.dnn@bell.net)*