

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Thoughts on Voting Systems

By Stephen Somerville

There has been a good amount of talk lately about the need for the utilization of a ward system in Aurora.

I will deal with this issue specifically in an upcoming column, but I have something to say about voting in general that is much more basic than that.

About a decade ago the provincial government appointed a Citizen's Assembly to look at potentially changing our first-past-the-post system to a proportional representation approach.

They considered eight principles and characteristics as it evaluated electoral systems. These principles included, legitimacy, fairness of representation, voter choice, stable and effective government, effective parliament, stronger voter participation, accountability and simplicity and practicality. The regulation also allowed the Assembly to consider any other principles or characteristics it believed were important.

Let's take a quick look at a few of these principles and how they stack up against our current system.

While I agree that majority governments in this country have been elected with as little as 40 percent of the popular vote, any voting system employed in Canada is legitimate if the people of our society accept it as so.

Individuals may not like the outcome of a particular election, but as long as everyone agrees with the rules going into the game, the results are legitimate. It is like changing the rules for a hockey game. If people agree that both sides should use ten men on the ice instead of five (plus the goalie), the final score of the game would be legitimate.

These same people further argue that the collective voice of a large amount of people - sometimes as many as 60 percent of the electorate - are often unheard when a majority is elected. While this has validity, some make the case that a government elected with 51 percent of the vote, still doesn't represent the concerns of the other 49 percent. No matter what you do, some people will not be happy with the electoral outcome.

The existing system does afford people lots of choice. You have the three main parties, plus a number of others. Each of them offers differing perspectives and solutions.

The existing system is also both simple and practical. Everyone understands how the process works.

The existing system, despite some obvious flaws, does work.

You may be asking yourself: "That may be all fine and good, Stephen, but in the grand scheme of things how come the voting percentage continues to decline?"

That is a good question, (and one that I will offer thoughts on in the future) but as I look at this issue I ask myself a different question; why change the voting system if people are not taking their civic responsibility seriously? Why make it better or easier to vote if a large number of people are already apathetic? Voters should show us that they care - by using their franchise - before any changes are made.

If people don't want to vote, fine. They will be governed by those who do vote.

Look at last October's municipal election. We had an exciting four-person race for mayor and many individuals stepped forward to seek the Council seats. There were also important issues on the table that affect all of our everyday lives - the issues of growth, the level, quality and costs of services, and the appropriate level of taxation.

But how did we repay these individuals? With a low voter turnout.

Shameful!

Just when I thought our community does not care, I realized that they can be mobilized for two types of endeavors: volunteering for something, or when an issue does affect them specifically.

We have all seen the success of Rib Fest, the Santa Claus parade or the Haunted Forest. It seems that we need a fun family activity to get people interested enough to assist.

I have also seen families at the churches in town collectively work together to help someone or to support an initiative.

We also take action when a particular item affects our community or a neighborhood.

Look no further than the Highland Gate issue. Meetings associated with this issue attracted large crowds.

So, members in our community DO have the capacity to take action; make use of it then.

The privilege to cast a ballot should be one of our most cherished freedoms, but too many people don't take this responsibility, and the obligations that come with it, seriously.

Voters should show us that they care. A good starting point would include getting out there and voting in the Federal election

scheduled for this coming October.

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