

POLITICS AS USUAL: A Force for Change

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Within the context of the political realm, it's certainly been an interesting few weeks for the GTA and indeed the country as a whole.

I don't think it is mere hyperbole to suggest that as a result of the absolutely shameful shenanigans within the Senate, the Province and the Mayor's Office of the city of Toronto to name just a few, there is an imminent crisis of confidence in our elected officials. Average Joe on the street must be shaking his head in disgust at the disreputable conduct shown by those in whom we have placed our ultimate trust ? those whom we have elected (or as in the case of the Senate ? NOT elected!) to govern our affairs.

The Senate expense imbroglio has bubbled to the point of boiling now, with the resignation of the senior-most advisor to the Prime Minister, Nigel Wright. While Mr. Wright has fallen on his sword, the questions are swirling as to what, if anything, the PM knew about the payment made to Senator Duffy and when.

It is a distasteful and unseemly situation for our PM to be in.

In addition to questions about the PM's potential role in the affair, the country is further scandalized as we have four Senators and counting that are being investigated by various levels of authority ? from the Federal Ethics Officer to the RCMP. Allegations of fraud are being bandied about.

In Canada's biggest city ? Toronto ? the controversy with Mayor Ford continues to deepen. We learned late Thursday evening that Mayor Ford has fired his Chief of Staff, demonstrating yet another questionable action by a thoroughly beleaguered Senior elected official.

It begs the question ? just what the heck is going on? Every day a new debacle. I think I can hear the hooves of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse on their way?

But an even more important questions springs to mind - what can we (and I am using the royal ?we? here) do about it all?

To be blunt ? not a heck of a lot. Once you've marked an ?x? beside someone's name, and enough people have done the same, then that person gets to occupy that seat for the set term, regardless of what he or she has done.

Yes, there are a few ? miniscule few ? reasons how and why an elected person can be turfed from office.

Being tossed into jail for example ? not while on trial, mind you, as the folks in London are learning?

However, it is virtually impossible to remove an elected official from office or hold them accountable for their actions while in or as a result of their time office. Just look at the situation in Montreal.

Literally decades of (allegedly) corrupt activities by all manner of elected officials and only now are they being held accountable.

The cynic in me believes that the inquiry will have limited results. I doubt all those responsible will be held to account, and certainly not to the extent that they deserve to be.

In my opinion, while the process by which we elect and are governed by the members of our various levels of government is a truly democratic process (leaving aside the issue of appointments; I think I've made my point about the appointment process so I won't rehash it here); there's nothing democratic about the processes that keep them there. There is no accountability once they are comfortably ensconced in their elected seat.

The supposed legislative accountability mechanisms (the Election Act, the Conflict of Interest Act, Municipal Act etc.) are not accessible in any reasonable way. They are uniformly costly, lengthy, byzantine in design and implementation, and ultimately useless.

Those poor souls that do try to use one of the few accountability tools available and hold an elected or formerly elected official to account are vilified for being ?politically motivated? or having an axe to grind.

This is, of course, on top of paying enormous legal bills for the privilege of going to court on the public's behalf.

There should be greater checks and balances to ensure that those in office do not run roughshod over the very people and communities they have been elected to serve.

One easy check and balance to institute at the municipal level at least is recording closed session meetings. The public has a right to know that in the event that there is a question about what was or was not decided in closed session, that there is a record ? an accurate record.

I wager that many a community would have avoided whopping legal bills had there been a real record of closed session shenanigans of their councilors.

Councillor Thompson made just such a motion a few months back (as I did 4 years ago!) and the staff report and motion was before

Council last week at GC and will be further debated this week at Council.

I will reserve my comments on the motion to audiotape closed session until after the Council vote. I am interested to hear the debate and, of course, the vote. Should be ?illuminating.?

That's it for this week, until next week, stay informed, stay involved, because this is after all, Our Town.