

POLITICS AS USUAL: Bifurcated focus

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

How we vote affects who we elect.

Some feel our current process isn't fair; that elections result in governments that are not truly representative.

Prime Minister Trudeau seeks to address the arguable inequities of our 'first past the post' electoral process by considering alternatives.

But why stop there?

How we elect other levels of government also warrant a gander. Consider Regional government, where it's not only a 'first-past-the-post system' it's a 'first past two posts'.

In York Region, municipal elections use a process called 'double direct' elections. That means for some offices - such as Mayor and Regional Councillor - voters get a 'two-fer', they elect two offices at the same time. Thus, despite there being only one election, every Mayor in York Region, is also elected to sit on Regional Council and every Regional Councillor (Aurora, King and East Gwillimbury do not have a Regional Councillor), is also elected to sit on their local Municipal Council.

As a result only 11 of 21 Regional reps have actually been specifically elected to do so.

Regional Councillors run on a platform of addressing Regional matters. Residents know where they stand and voted accordingly.

Mayoral contests are focused on local issues. Regional matters barely rate a mention.

Once elected, their regional mandate is, therefore, a bit of a question mark.

The question of what does 'representation' mean in that context, is a valid one.

Many questions arise when mayors wear the hat of Regional Representative: whose interests are they representing? The Region?

Their Council? Both? How do they even identify those interests? How and to whom do they reconcile the difference between the two when conflicts arise?

I would posit the argument there are questions of accountability as it speaks to the role of Mayors on Regional Council when speaking for residents of their municipality on Regional matters.

Given that more than 50% of a Mayor's time is spent on Regional matters, it is a legitimate question to ask on what, how and why that time is spent.

'Regional Reports' are dutifully added to Council agendas every month. They include highlights on Regional items, but they are somewhat generic: no in depth analysis of matters discussed, no report on the implications of various matters for Aurorans, not even a summary of how our representative voted and why.

Worse, it's not clear if they're even required to.

The recent Regional Chair vote at Regional Council is a good example of why double direct elections can be problematic when considering effective and accountable representation.

The municipal Councils of Markham, Aurora and Whitchurch-Stouffville voted to support the motion (put forward by Regional Councillor Li) to elect the Chair. However, the votes at the municipal level were not unanimous. Regional representatives such as the Mayors of Aurora and Markham voted against their respective Council's motion to support the election of a Regional Chair. When the matter came before Regional Council, the question arose: will they support their Council's majority decision, or will they vote against?

In choosing to vote against the matter, they could, in effect, nullify their own Council's majority vote on a Regional matter.

The actual vote was to defer.

Therein lies the problem with the double direct election process. As it requires a Mayor to function in two roles, it is not clear that they are obligated to vote in accordance with a majority decision of their own Council or even in their own municipalities' best interest over the Region's.

Further, Ontario has a 'weak' mayor system. Under legislation, the mayor of a municipality has little real additional authority compared other Council members. The Mayor is not first among equals, but rather just one equal vote. Yet when that same Mayor sits at Regional Council as a representative, s/he appears to assume outsized - or at least ambiguous - decision-making power on behalf of the municipality.

It is difficult to hold two elected offices at the same time. It's not allowed at any other level of government, for obvious reasons.

There are inevitable conflicts between competing interests.

Double direct election creates part-time Mayors who are also part-time Regional Representatives; it bifurcates focus which impacts

the effectiveness of their representation at either level.

Not every municipality employs double-direct election, so why not look at what others are doing? Personally, I think we need a full-time Mayor and a full-time Regional Councillor. At the very least, I think it's worth a discussion.