

FRANKLY SPEAKING: Deserters

No Consequences for Deserters

By Frank Klees, MPP

Voters in five Ontario ridings will be heading to the polls on Thursday, August 1 because their duly elected provincial Members of Parliament deserted them and abandoned their Oath of Office.

I found this common dictionary definition that describes what it means "to desert or abandon". The conduct of some of my former colleagues fits the description:

"The act by which a person abandons and forsakes, without justification, a condition of public, social, or family life, renouncing its responsibilities and evading its duties. A willful abandonment of an employment or duty in violation of a legal or moral obligation." Every candidate who ran in the last general election did so with the knowledge that if elected, they were committing to serve for a four year term of office.

The Election Statute Law Amendment Act, 2005 states that beginning in 2007, provincial elections in Ontario must be held every four years on the first Thursday in October.

Barring a vote of non-confidence in the government, every MPP who swore the Oath of Office made a solemn commitment to their constituents and to the Crown to faithfully serve out that term of office. I checked my copy and there are no conditions or fine print.

So, who are these five deserting Liberal MPPs, what changed for them just two years into their term of office and what are the consequences to them, to their constituents and to the province?

Dwight Duncan, the former Minister of Finance presided over the Province's descent into a have-not province and left us with an \$11.9 billion deficit and a debt of \$273 billion. What changed? "There are other personal developments including my next career" he said as he announced his resignation.

Chris Bentley, the former Minister of Energy who was found in breach of parliamentary privilege for withholding documents on the cancelled power plants scandal. What changed? "It's time to start writing the next chapter in my life" he was quoted on his way out.

Laurel Broten, the former Minister of Education who was at the centre of the Liberals' dust-up with the teachers' unions. What changed? She was demoted when Kathleen Wynne became Premier and on her way out, told reporters "It's time for me to look forward to the challenges of the next chapter in my career." She's moving to Halifax, Nova Scotia to pursue those challenges.

Margaret Best, the former Minister of Health Promotion. What changed? She was left out of Kathleen Wynne's cabinet and hasn't bothered to show up at Queen's Park since.

Dalton McGuinty, the former Premier who presided over more scandals than all Ontario Premiers combined since confederation. When he resigned as Premier, he committed that he would serve out his term as MPP until the next provincial election. What changed? Nothing. Even that promise was impossible to keep. Now we're told he's off to take up a fellowship at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. I'm not kidding!

So what are the consequences to these honourable members for deserting their constituents, breaking the public trust, and imposing the inconvenience and cost of unnecessary elections?

Let's start with a lucrative severance package. Based on a formula of eighteen months of the highest three consecutive years of salary for eight years of service or more, the consequence for Dalton MacGuinty is a severance payout of \$313,000. Dwight Duncan and Chris Bentley each get \$248,000. The other two will receive payments in proportion to their years of service.

Before I'm accused of partisan amnesia, I am well aware that there are two more examples of by-elections being forced since the 2011 election. One was former Liberal Finance Minister Greg Sorbara and the other was PC Elizabeth Witmer who resigned to take on the job as Chair of the WSIB. Neither can be justified. Bottom line? Finish your job and honour your commitments.

While I believe that there is practical justification for severance payments, in circumstances where an elected official at any level of government chooses to resign mid-term, at the very least any severance payments should be forfeited and applied to offset the cost of the self-imposed by-election.

The final consequence

is in the hands of the voters

At the end of the day, it will be up to the voters to deliver the verdict on what I believe is a blatant disrespect for our democratic

process. While the deserters may be beyond reach - having taken up residence in their new Bay Street office or settled in to a new challenge - far removed from the disgrace of their abandonment, their political parties should be dealt the consequence. By-elections are becoming far too common and should not be accepted by the electorate without consequences for either the individual or their party who impose them. The final consequence is in the hands of the voters..

www.franklees.com