

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Modifying the formats for the Municipal Debates

By Stephen Somerville

The next provincial election will take place on Thursday June 7. By sometime in early May you will most likely receive a knock on the door from one of the candidates or you may see a pamphlet from one of them in your mailbox.

The municipal campaigns won't gear up until the early fall. Part of this process will involve public forums and debates where those seeking council seats or the mayor's chair can discuss their respective visions for the Town.

I have attended a number of the federal, provincial and municipal debates in our community over the years, and for the most part, I have found them wanting. That is not to say that they have not been entertaining or interesting. But as a way to impart knowledge and subject candidates to a thoughtful and respectful inspection and evaluation of their views, not a chance.

The reason that the local public forums have not been overtly successful has nothing to do with the candidates themselves or their supporters.

The Town Hall is usually jammed, and the atmosphere is electric and tense, similar to that prior to a big prizefight.

It has to do with two things; the number of aspirants for the positions and also the format of the debates themselves.

Let's take a brief look at recent federal and provincial Leaders debates.

These debates are held in a television studio, without an audience, usually the party leaders are asked questions by a panel of eminent journalists. Sometimes questions are asked of the leaders directly from the voters; this is done via a video clip.

The debate format has been modified a few times over the years, depending upon the number of party leaders invited to take part. As there were only three party leaders involved in the 1984 and 1988 debates, each of the prime ministerial aspirants had a number of one-on-one sessions with the others. This led to the memorable and electric Mulroney and Turner exchanges in both 1984 and 1988.

The format was altered again for the federal debates held during the most recent federal election. Each of the party leaders was not allowed to directly engage the other leaders. It was therefore really a case of the leaders delivering prepared statements.

There was some verbal inter-play, but nothing extraordinary took place, no real fireworks or the proverbial 'knock-out' punch occurred. According to published reports, lots of viewers liked the fact that this format allowed for a more respectful tone of communication and they really had a chance to hear 'uninterrupted' the party positions enunciated by the party leaders.

Not me, I like the confrontational aspect of the debates. I agree that the format does not work with five people speaking over one another and I also very much agree that a more respectful tone is required. A great moderator is also a must.

However, I think they should bring back the one-on-one engagement. The leaders need to have their opinions subjected to the scrutiny of the harshest light 'and aside from news media reports of the party platforms, debate night is the only night of un-filtered focus. I want to see how a party leader defends their platform position under cross-examination and I also want to see party leaders pick logical holes in their opponents' arguments.

At the local level, the introduction of the one-on-one format could be done for both the upcoming provincial candidates and the mayoralty debates.

The problem is that the council debate could include up to twenty candidates, which can be a logistical and thematic nightmare.

For arguments' sake, let's assume there are twenty Aurora council candidates. I humbly suggest that each Council candidate should be given an opportunity for a one to two-minute opening statement. Then, why not group (via a random draw) the candidates into groups of five. Make each 'bear pit' session either fifteen or twenty minutes. A question is then posed to the group. After a suitable amount of time has been spent on the question, another question is then put forward. Four to six questions should get dealt with during this time.

Each candidate can offer their respective opinion or challenge the assertions / policies of the others. This format can work if you have a very strong moderator who lays out the ground rules, and makes sure that the candidates follow them. It also works if the candidates themselves truly respect their fellow candidates and give their competitors the time to finish their sentences before interrupting!

Another suggestion is that, while the event should be held as an open forum, there should not be public questions. Verbal questions from the audience are rarely asked with the sincere intention of seeking an answer. They are usually asked, after a suitably healthy and highly partisan pre-amble, only in order to embarrass one particular candidate.

Allow members of the media only to ask the questions or, prior to the event, have a panel choose from audience submitted written

questions. Or have a mix of media and public questions, but have the moderator read out the questions.

The citizens of Aurora deserve a vigorous and respectful debate this fall on the issues of growth, the level, quality and costs of services, and the appropriate level of taxation. Re-vamping the debate format could lead to an interesting, engaging and thoughtful discussion of Aurora's future.

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