

POLITICS AS USUAL: A battle or contest?

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

We believe that we have a truly democratically elected government.

We believe we have open elections, open nomination contests, open and transparent voting processes. However, those beliefs are predicated on a number of assumptions that may or may not in fact be true.

Frankly, who we ultimately vote into office is the product of many processes that are far from fair, and even further from transparent. It starts with the nomination process; how one becomes the candidate of record in any provincial or federal campaign for office and gets one's name on a ballot.

(Note I am excluding municipal races as they don't involve party politics, at least not in Ontario, so the comments don't apply. Municipal races are a whole different kettle of fish)

Every time we approach an election, and the process begins anew to anoint or sorry, vote in the candidate of record for each party, an inevitable unseemly battle emerges within the various ridings where the seat is in play. And believe me, it is a battle. It's why they call it a nomination fight.

Witness the ugly press reports about the multitude of lawsuits that have been filed over nomination contests that have gone south. For example, a federal Liberal candidate sued the party's national director over alleged interference in a nomination battle. Or more recently, in the by-election battle in the riding of Markham-Thornhill, there was a great deal of unflattering coverage for the Liberals about a candidate that withdrew from the race again alleging interference by the party leadership to show favouritism to one candidate.

Similar reports appeared in the press about controversies in a number of ridings where potential PC candidates are alleging interference in all aspects of the nomination process - from the vetting process, to access to the membership rolls to even the date of the nomination vote.

So, it isn't limited to one party or another. The problem is that the nomination process itself is ripe for interference - real or perceived. While I could spend thousands of words on how the rules of the nomination process of every party, at every level - appear to be written in disappearing ink, I will leave that commentary to others. I'd like to focus on two elements of the process that I think warrant an immediate rethink - and that's who gets to vote.

Right now, after being a member of a party for less than three weeks, you can vote for the candidate of choice for your riding. Heck, you can even vote for your candidate of choice to lead your party - you know the party you joined less than a month ago?

Personally, I have always thought that was ridiculous. Why should you get to have a say in who leads the party, when you literally just joined?

I think that in order to vote, you should be a member in good standing for at least six months. That would demonstrate that you have a vested interest in the success of party. I would like to see some analysis done on the retention rate of members signed up, solely for the purpose of a nomination vote. Do they vote in the provincial or federal election for which they chose the candidate? Do they stay as members of the party? I doubt it.

And while we are on the topic of who can vote, if the purpose of nominating a candidate is to win the seat for the riding, then why are members who cannot vote in the actual election allowed to vote in the nomination contest?

I am speaking of the practice in multiple parties of allowing members as young as 14 years old to cast a vote for the candidate. Again, what is the point in that? They can't vote in the general election and yet they have a significant impact on who will carry the party flag in that election. Again, this makes no sense to me.

Yes, it is vitally important to growth of the party to swell the membership rolls and that can be a positive impact of a nomination contest. It is similarly vitally important to engage our youth in the political process as early as possible so as to ensure we develop an informed future electorate.

That being said, who a party selects as its candidate should be based on a voting process that is fair, and sensible and has the best chance of securing the riding. And that is the goal, isn't it?