

POLITICS AS USUAL: Breach of Public Trust

A Breach of Public Trust

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

If it is even possible, the situation in Ottawa has escalated now that the Mounties have been called in. Allegations of 'Breach of Public Trust' are being bandied about in relation to the purported spending transgressions of a few of our Senators.

It's the same charge that has been levied against the beleaguered Mayor Fontana, the London, ON, Mayor who is alleged to have used federal money to pay for his child's wedding. Not sure of the details but again it is the RCMP that has laid the charge.

Given the severity of the potential implications of such a charge, it is not one that is levelled lightly and I am astonished, frankly, to see it being used in connection with the alleged shenanigans of the members of our most senior house of government.

As per my post last week, I am loathe to pile on the public chastisement of folks who have merely been charged; however, in the case of the Senators, at least, the charges stem from a finding of their own internal review board which found that they had broken the rules as it speaks to claiming reimbursements and have to pay us back the money they have 'taken'.

The RCMP was called in to investigate the matter based on the findings to date.

But what is a 'breach of public trust'? The cynic in me says, well, couldn't that be said about any politician? Does the average person 'trust' a politician anyway? Many make election promises and then promptly break them within days of assuming office. Is that not 'breaking our trust'?

No, it's a lot more serious than breaking campaign promises. It speaks to a severe failure to uphold the duties, responsibilities of your elected office.

Those duties are generally defined in the oath of office that all those elected must sign and/or swear. The oath of office is not a bureaucratic formality or just a fancy ceremony. It is a legal process. Councillors and MPPs and Mayors alike are swearing an oath to always act in the best interest of the constituents they serve.

We 'by virtue of casting our ballots' put our faith and trust into those who have been elected to serve our interests for the furtherance and betterment of our community. Clearly, it is no small thing to have this charge levelled against one.

Breach of public trust is often closely associated with a charge of fraud 'as it is in the case of Mayor Fontana. In the case of Senator Duffy, it seems that documents show he allegedly charged the government twice for services rendered on the same day, numerous times 'campaigning and 'senatorial' work. Double dipping in the extreme, one could say. The fact that a senator was campaigning on behalf of candidates for office is an issue that I'd like to see addressed as well, but that's grist for another mill.

Using information gleaned by virtue of your office, for personal or others' gain is also an example of breach of trust.

It's like insider trading on the stock exchange 'it is severely frowned upon as Martha Stewart well knows. The legal definition states that it is 'the willful misappropriation, by a trustee, of a thing which had been lawfully delivered to him in confidence.'

So, tipping off your buddies on Bay Street about a pending change in Bank of Canada rates in advance of everyone else, could land an MP in the quagmire of a breach of public trust allegation.

Regardless of the level of government, municipal to federal and beyond, we expect those who represent us to do so with integrity. We expect them to bill us for their services in accordance with the rules 'just once, not twice; we expect them to hold confidential information confidential; we expect them to pay for their own weddings or vacations or house renovations and not charge the taxpayers instead.

It is a sad testament to the state of public affairs that one has to iterate these expectations, but given the current political reality, it is, unfortunately, a sorely needed reminder.

I'd like to end this week's column with a shameless plug for the Aurora 150 and the many events planned for this weekend's Canada Day celebrations. There are many events to choose from, for every age 'from the Much Music Video Dance and youth music extravaganza to the Dance in the Park with Canadian legendary rock band Lighthouse 'lots to see and enjoy. Please check out our website: www.aurora150.ca.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved because this is after all, Our Town.