

POLITICS AS USUAL: Lame Ducks

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

I had a lot of feedback about my column last week on term limits.

The gist of the comments were that folks agreed with the premise of limiting the number of terms a person can hold a particular elected office.

The subtext to the comments regarding the belief in the need for term limits is precisely what I had iterated in the piece ? folks are fed up with people being elected to do a job that they end up demonstrating little or no interest in doing.

They are more interested in playing the part, not doing their part. I get the frustration.

A title isn't a crown. A chain of office isn't a piece of jewelry.

They are symbols of responsibility and commitment to the residents of the municipality or province you have pledged to serve.

So, residents get justifiably annoyed when elected officials - regardless of office ? appear to sit back and do nothing for the three or four years they are elected to serve.

That being said, however, term limits may not be the answer.

Term limits bring with them their own constraints on how effective an MPP, mayor, or what have you, may be. Chief among them is the constraint of relevance and legitimacy.

I will use Barack Obama to illustrate the point.

Since he began his second term of office, the race to replace him began in earnest, as did calling into question what ? if any ? decisions he could ?legitimately? make given that he would not be around for another term. Refrains of, ?this is a decision for the next president? are heard repeatedly on any contentious decision.

Look at the Supreme Court appointment debacle.

Justice Scalia died in January ? a full 11 months before the election and 13 months before the new president takes office. A quarter of the term. And yet, the Republicans are arguing that the current president is essentially lame duck, that he should not have the right to affect the course of the Supreme Court ?so late in his term.?

Of course, they don't mention any limits to their own terms of office and concomitant implications to the legitimacy of their own decision making. But, I digress.

And this isn't a shot at the Republicans (I am a closet Kasich fan), but the arguments against Obama's appointment of the Justice are a sobering reminder of why term limits are hugely problematic to effective governance.

If term limits render fully one quarter of a term as ?lame duck,w? then one has to question its efficacy as a check on the negative impacts of entrenched leadership.

Even without term limits, we have ?lame duck? governments here in Canada. From the House of Commons, to the Legislature, to Municipal councils, our elected bodies essentially close up shop for the few months before an election. Do we want to extend that period from a few weeks to over a year? Can we afford to?

Personally, I am not sure that term limits will do the job that we want them to.

If someone gets elected and does nothing but cut ribbons for four years, I doubt limiting his or her chances to two terms will have any effect on that behaviour. The behaviour that has to change is ours. If you want effective leadership, you have to be an effective voter. It's that simple.

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