

POLITICS AS USUAL: Majorities

Does a majority a mandate make?

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

And by mandate, I mean free rein to institute any policy the newly ensconced government of the day sees fit to bring forward? This thought occurred to me the other day when I was listening to the talking heads debate the relative merits (or lack thereof) of Premier Wynne's new sex education curriculum.

One of the pundits intimated that Ms. Wynne and her red machine would have met with considerably less electoral success had they been upfront with this proposed, now soon to be implemented program. The supposition being that this 'controversial' program would have been toxic at the polls, so the party kept this political arrow in the quiver, only to be shot once a majority had been secured.

Interesting thought, though I think the premise is faulty. Every party has plans for when it attains office. Some of those plans are public and some are rolled out after the fact. I don't think it is necessarily nefarious (well, not always, at least). It is common sense. You don't give away all your ideas during a campaign, lest they be appropriated - or more accurately, stolen - by the other side. You do what you have to do to win first, then you do what you have to do to govern. But with a majority? You do what you want to do to govern.

And therein lays the problem: the wee little matter of why you were elected to govern. If what you presented as your policy goals, your policy direction, your political ideology to the voting public is abandoned once you get to office, the public does have the right to feel cheated, hoodwinked, conned. Pick whatever word approximates the words 'lied to' best. Not much the voters can do about it, though they can complain about it vociferously. And hold them to account the next time around? assuming anyone cares by that point, mind you.

But what of the idea that those that decide on our behalf decide things that we never intended them to discuss, let alone implement? Does a 'majority' give them carte blanche to move forward with any new idea that suits their fancy?

It would appear that way at times. When defending the imposition of a wildly unpopular policy or program, how often do we hear in response, the statement, 'the electorate gave us a strong mandate to govern'?? The next words 'as we see fit' are - of course - implied not spoken.

Leaving aside the paternalistic subtext of that statement, the 'there there dear, we know best' undertone, there is the larger issue of just what a mandate means exactly.

A mandate nowadays is built upon a foundation of rather flimsy political capital. With less than 40 per cent on average of the voting public bothering to vote, even if a party received 100 per cent of the votes cast, they still wouldn't represent upwards of 60 percent of the public.

As it stands, to put them in majority territory, the 'winning' party needs only 40 per cent of the votes cast or just 16 - 20 per cent of the eligible electorate. And with that, triumphant in victory, they proclaim that they have received an 'overwhelming majority' and a 'strong mandate' to govern as a consequence. Hogwash.

Thus, when next they attempt to inflict some pet project on the populace ostensibly for the good of us all, perhaps that would be a good time to remind them that the 'all' that they represent is - in reality - not much at all?

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