

POLITICS AS USUAL: Political Ethics

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Political ethics, or the lack thereof, has been much in the news as of late.

To many, the mere concept of political ethics is oxymoronic. How could it not be? Politicians are routinely lampooned for their lack of character, their hard but shiny veneers that hide a multitude of sins.

Frankly, we're no better here in Canada. With the now-alleged connection of the Mayor of Toronto to the pre-dawn raids in Toronto to find drugs and guns and illegal stashes of cash, to the RCMP investigation of a Senator and the former Chief of Staff of the PMO no less, the public's confidence in elected officials has been shaken to earthquake proportions.

The fallout of these two looming crises is yet to be seen, but it is clear that the worst is still to come, and that will have a detrimental effect on whatever remaining faith we have in our elected officials that they will do their jobs with some measure of integrity, no matter how small.

So it is within this larger context that I watched with some bemusement, the Aurora Council's deliberations on yet another iteration of the Town's Code of Ethics. Given what has transpired in Aurora over the last decade or so, I think it is safe to say that this policy has had, and will continue to have, little or no relevance to the actual workings of municipal office.

It certainly hasn't affected how some who hold or have held office discharge their responsibilities.

Full disclosure here ? my day job is oversight of ethics and regulatory compliance and conduct within the context of research conducted in a post secondary institutional environment.

Clearly, I am not against ethics codes or regulations. I think professional codes of ethics are a vital check and balance for those professions they govern. If that represents a bias, so be it.

With that in mind, I will say that I have always found the creation and, worse, the adoption of codes of ethics for politicians to be highly problematic for two main reasons: lack of objective criteria and potential for abuse.

A code of ethics presumes there is a common standard of ?practice? for the profession or association. It is predicated on the assumption that there is in fact an agreed upon set of known metrics against which a politician's actions will be measured.

Just who decides the metrics? Who is the arbiter of ?appropriate? actions? We have heard some politicians state categorically what is and is not ?allowed? in terms of fellow politicians' conduct. Really?

And what skill set do members of Council, by virtue of just getting elected, bring to the table that affords them the ability to make that judgment?

The language of political codes of ethics is so vague, so broad, that frankly anyone can be accused of violating them and virtually anyone can argue that they have breached nothing.

The second? Politics is a very dirty game and the availability of laying such a juicy charge as being ?unethical? against a political foe is almost too much for opposing parties, or politicians to resist.

We have seen it at virtually every level of government. Charges of breaching the code of ethics are shouted out in the council chambers, and legislatures and House of Commons of the nation, and salaciously covered in virtually every newspaper. Facts don't matter. Implication is everything.

As someone who regularly deals with issues of ethics compliance and non-compliance, I can tell you that such allegations are always handled confidentially. Why? Because you can't un-ring a bell, that's why.

Laying a charge isn't the same as being found guilty of a charge. Yet, in political circles, all that matters is laying the charge ? loudly and publicly ? knowing full well that the allegation alone is often enough to do significant reputational damage.

It abuses the very purpose of the code of ethics in the first place ? to be educational. The code is there to act as a guide for appropriate actions while in office ? not act as a sword of Damocles ready to slice you in two whenever your opponent feels the need ? or sees the advantage.

That's it for this week, until next week stay informed, stay involved because this is, after all, Our Town.