

POLITICS AS USUAL: Summer Doldrums?

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

This week it was difficult to choose just one topic from the veritable smorgasbord of political stories currently dominating the headlines.

At the Federal level, we have the ongoing Senate shenanigans that have certainly heated up substantially with the Wallin audit revelations. I am glad that the government has decided to audit all Senators' expenses. I have long thought that it was a bit unfair to focus on the four boldface Senators (Duffy, Brazeau, Harb, Wallin). Yes, their expense account abuses do appear to be egregious. And the Keystone Cops-like approach to managing the scandal does not help the situation. It doesn't take an IT genius to figure out when you've altered your e-calendar for example. And 'secret' cheques don't stay secret for very long.

However, regardless of how one feels about the antics of the four named Senators, I would hazard a guess that they are not alone in their 'misinterpretation' of the rules.

Either everyone is audited, or no one.

Singling out a few for inquisition and slaughter as sacrificial lambs does nothing to improve the public's opinion of the house of sober second thought. It does the exact opposite, in fact.

It gives the impression that their antics are merely the tip of the iceberg.

By reviewing every Senator's accounts (something that should be done as a matter of course on a fairly regular basis), it will be demonstrated, hopefully, that the vast majority of Senators are not abusing the public's purse.

At the provincial level, we have the continuing debacle of the gas plant cancellation investigatory committee meetings. Senior staff from former Premier McGuinty's office are now being paraded in front of the committee to answer for their roles in the whole mess.

Well, 'answer for' may be too strong a descriptor of their appearances before the committee as, from what I have read and seen, they've answered very little. The verbal gymnastics of the folks before the committee is quite extraordinary.

Non-answer answers seem to be the order of the day. It has become an absolute circus. The purpose of the meetings seems lost amidst the partisan political posturing and pot-shot taking across the table. Regardless of one's political stripes, one would have to agree that as an exercise in transparency, these hearings have failed completely.

Nothing of substance about how this happened, and how it can be prevented in the future, has been revealed. What has been revealed? The skilful way politicians and political staffers alike can avoid answering straightforward questions. It's pretty disheartening.

And at the municipal level? Well, what can one say about the goings on in the council chambers of the towns and cities in our fair province?

The City of Toronto stumbles on amidst yet more allegations swirling around their Mayor. In York Region, we have front page news in the Toronto Star about a Markham Councillor walking out of a 'secret' meeting to discuss the controversial Arena deal. With hundreds of millions of dollars at issue, the Arena brouhaha will only get worse in the months to come.

And, closer to home we have our own controversies brewing. Not least of which is the now approved Council motion to use the Hydro reserve fund as an 'internal loan' or debt financing source.

It is to be used to partially fund the cost of the Joint operations centre and the youth centre - the cost of which is over \$21 million dollars. What to do with the substantial monies in the Hydro reserve has been a controversial subject for years now and using it to cover debt - albeit temporarily - is sure to ramp up the rhetoric considerably. When folks get back from vacation and start paying attention again, that is.

Anyway, there you have it. Politics at all levels is as engaging and frustrating as always - even in the doldrums of summer.

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