

POLITICS AS USUAL: The Ol' Boys Club

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

I am in the midst of a search for a rather mythic beast.

No, not the yeti, Bigfoot or the Abominable Snowman. Not even our dear Nessie. I am on the hunt for much bigger game. I am in search of this nebulous, but oft mentioned group of persons known collectively as, ?the old boys club?.

Given the prominence of this supposed group of power-brokers I would assume that they would be readily recognizable by us common folk. Some of our local political commentators sure seem to be able to identify them ? as a group, mind you, not individually.

I have seen the ?old boys club? referred to in multiple media sources and in reference to multiple municipal (and other) governments and the decisions made by their leaders. Aurora, Newmarket, Brampton, Mississauga, Oshawa, Ottawa ? virtually all of Quebec's local governments ? multitudes of disparate municipalities seem to be run by this never seen but omnipresent ? omniscient even ? group of men. And yet?

No one ever specifies who is a member of this ?club?. No one even states what the heck the criteria is to be a member. Do they have to pay dues? Is there a secret handshake? Do they all wear special decoder rings so that they can spot another member from the teeming masses over which they supposedly exert such control?

Though I have never seen these mythic men myself, I envision a group of white-haired, cigar-chomping, bourbon-swilling old men, sitting in leather wing-backed chairs, around a large round oak table, guffawing loudly as they divvy up the vast sums of public money that they control.

I looked up the definition of ?Old Boys Club.? According to the Urban Dictionary (OED, surprisingly, did not have a definition of ?Old Boys Club?), the Old Boys Club is, ?? an informal system by which money and power are retained by wealthy white men through incestuous business relationships.?

It seems a few folks maybe using this term a wee bit out of context. Or perhaps, just incorrectly. Or perhaps they just don't know what the heck it means, but they know it resonates with people so they will just use it whenever they want to insinuate something untoward is afoot.

Indeed, it seems that politicians of every stripe, seeking every office, trot out the old canard of ?Old Boys Club? or ?the elite? whenever they are trying to get traction on their message(s) and need an easy - but anonymous ? scapegoat for why things are as they are and how much better things would be if we all just elected them.

It's lazy politicking, in my opinion. It's a method of appealing to ?otherness? that has ? unfortunately ? been quite effective for some.

By saying that there's some kind of party going on somewhere, and you're not invited, they are playing to the sense of injustice that pervades the political discourse for the financially constrained voting public.

Without ever giving a face to these ?old boys club members?, they nonetheless give credence to the idea that they exist in the first place.

I am not so naïve as to think that powerbrokers do not exist, or have influence on, the machinery of governance. I have no doubt that there are leaders that can be - and have been ? bought and sold by the wealthy and powerful. But at the municipal level, one has to ask the question: where's the end game here? There are no Super-Pac funds at the municipal level. No vast pots of money made available to the candidate(s) of choice.

The maximum allowed for a campaign in a lower tier municipality is barely more than \$30,000, with a maximum single donation allowed set at \$750. Not sure who can be bought for \$750, but I hope we can all spot him a mile away.

If the Old Boys Club runs the show, and our elected leaders are mere puppets in the play, then show me the strings. Otherwise, let's focus on the issues of importance and leave the red herrings to the Swedes.

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