

POLITICS AS USUAL: Third Parties

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Apparently Aurora was not the only municipality to have an episode of 'flyer-gate' in the recent election.

Newmarket also had some flyers circulating about candidates just prior to the election. The flyers in question also had the same kind of message that the 'nasty' flyer in Aurora had - who not to vote for.

That was pretty much the sum total of what the flyers had to say. No reason why. Just don't do it. At least the Aurora flyers had cartoonish 'reasons' why folks shouldn't vote for the incumbents and, therefore, vote for the list of preferred candidates on the back. The Newmarket flyer didn't mention any other candidates.

This brings me to my own concern about the flyers.

It's not the messaging that troubles me most - though I do have to say that I find it curious that folks behind the flyers would be that blunt as to say 'do NOT vote for candidate X?'. Usually there is a bit more subtlety in the messaging, and there's good reason for that.

People do not like to be told who to vote for and even less who not to vote for.

You must at least give the illusion of informed choice. Ordering someone to not vote for someone takes away the face-saving artifice of campaign messaging. It gives the impression that you think that folks are either too dumb to make their own decisions or, worse, can be bullied/scared/fear-mongered into voting for the candidate in question.

Not a good strategy in my books.

It's not the messaging itself but rather the fact that it is third party messaging that causes me to wrinkle my nose and say, 'hmmmm? this smells bad?'. Regardless of the office sought, as a candidate you have to declare your campaign expenses.

It's usually pretty straightforward at the municipal level. Advertisements in local papers, door knockers, signs etc. Nothing too elaborate.

Third party advertising gets around those rules - campaign finance limits, responsibility for messages on behalf of candidates. All of it.

Third parties are folks ostensibly not aligned with, or part, of a particular campaign that are nonetheless allowed to advertise on behalf of a candidate and influence the voter.

They are allowed to use their own money (unlimited amounts) for their personal support of a particular candidate.

They can create nasty flyers or adverts on behalf of a candidate, while the candidate keeps his or her hands clean. And if it goes south, then the candidate can say it was 'the other side' that created them to make him/her look bad.

At the provincial and federal levels, there are rules for how and how much third-party advertising can occur. Third-party advertisers have to register with the Chief Electoral Officer once they spend \$500.

All third-party adverts require a statement of authorization and those who pay for them must file financial statements following the election.

But, at the municipal level, things get pretty murky.

No declarations are required. We have a situation where pretty much anything goes. You can buy enormous billboards saying 'Don't vote for Candidate X?' and there's nothing Candidate 'X?' can do about it.

The only solace we have is that the stakes at the municipal level are too low to warrant the interference of nefarious folks bent on spending millions of dollars to influence the outcome of a local election.

But it is possible, and that's my point.

Why allow for even further avenues for mudslinging? Local politics is already pretty nasty stuff these days. Why not close this gap and bring in the same rules that exist for provincial and federal elections?

If there are folks out there that want to use their money to sway the electorate in one way or another, that's perfectly fine. But there should be a set of rules by which they must abide. It's not a perfect solution, but it is better than the Wild, Wild West we have right now!

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