

POLITICS AS USUAL: Three problems with voter apathy

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

If the recent elections tell us anything, it's that it's time for a change.

We continue to see election after election with dismal voter turnout. Typically only 1/3 of our community bothers to vote and, as a result, we have the concomitant level of representation.

I am not advocating a return to a state of benign or not-so-benign despotism, but I do think there needs to be a discussion about how to improve access to, and engagement in, our democratic process.

When close to 40,000 people can vote, and only 12-13,000 actually bother to do so, I think we have a problem. And we should do more than just acknowledge it.

Each time we have an election, there is hand-wringing about voter apathy, lack of engagement, and the simple fact that a significant number of folks just don't seem to care about voting. But, soon after the election we move on to other things and the concerns raised just fade into the background, until there is another election and we discover again how little anyone seems to care about who governs them at the municipal level.

Rather than get preachy, let's consider some of the implications of poor voter turnout. I think if voters had a clearer sense of the negative outcomes of either not voting or ill-informed voting, they may change their attitude and behaviours.

I see three key problems related to poor voter turnout. When less than 40 percent of voters vote, we have representation that isn't representative. I am not saying those who have been elected are somehow illegitimate or have no mandate to govern; what I am saying is that that mandate to govern has been granted to them by a small percentage of engaged voters.

The majority abdicates responsibility to the minority, and the minority is often mobilized because they are exercised about a specific issue. We end up with Councils that have pandered to a specific, small group in order to get elected. You can't blame them. It works! But agenda-driven politics is hardly the way to good governance and we all suffer as a result.

The second problem is that low voter turnout benefits the incumbents. Combined with the fact that we do not have term limits, we end up with deadwood on Council simply because folks are not engaged enough to take a hard look at who is running to represent their community.

You have folks sitting around that table for the fourth or fifth time (in Toronto, there have been councillors in office for over 20 years!) who have contributed little if anything to the community and yet have secured their spot for another four years and then pontificate about the trust the community has placed in them. Poppycock!

I know that there is a belief that the voters are never wrong but they are also not always right. Voting in the same folks over and over and over simply because you recognize their name is hardly informed choice or even responsible choice for that matter.

Which leads to the third and final problem - low voter turnout diminishes the esteem or the importance to which we ascribe elected office. It says that we have so little regard for those who hold elected office that we cannot be bothered to choose amongst those who wish to serve the community. And that is a very sad state of affairs.

The problems are not complicated to fix. They just take some hard work and determined effort. To engage the public you have to make the conversation meaningful. You have to give folks a reason to participate. And you have to give them proof that their opinions will be truly considered; that their concerns will be acted upon. They don't want platitudes and empty promises. They want real outcomes.

Most of all, they want to know that they matter, as people, as community members - matter. All the time. Not just at election time.

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