

POLITICS AS USUAL: Time to Reform

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

The circus that was Toronto City politics last week has driven home one absolutely glaring point ? that our governance mechanisms are woefully inadequate.

Changes are needed to our current system, particularly how we elect our leaders and what tools we need to have to get rid of them when they fail to do the job.

Across Canada, regardless of the order of government, we have a ?first past the post? method of selecting our elected officials. This system rewards those that manage to amass just enough to pass the other guys, resulting in a situation where the ?winner? is one in name only, having often only secured 20 or 30% of the actual vote. And that's 20 or 30 % of those that chose to vote.

Personally, I do not think that anyone should be occupying a seat of elected office ? regardless of the level of government ? unless they have secured 50 +1 percent of the votes cast. The purpose of elected office is to represent the people of your community. If you haven't managed to gain the support of a majority of the members of your community, then how can you possibly say you are representing them?

There are two popular methods of addressing the inherent inequity of our current system ? runoffs and proportional representation. I think both have merits, though I would lean more towards the idea of proportional representation. Run offs force voters to choose between the top vote getters until there's a clear winner.

You see this type of voting in party conventions. The draw back? It can take a long time, and a great deal of money.

Proportional representation means that every vote counts. To quote Fair Vote Canada, ?Proportional representation is any voting system designed to produce a representative body where voters elect representatives in proportion to our votes.?

The drawback, of course, is implementing such a system. It would be difficult to see how it could be operationalized at the municipal level, for example. Nonetheless, I think it is a reform worth exploring.

The second issue that needs to be addressed? Being able to get rid of someone once they're elected.

As Torontonians have just found out, unless the Mayor of Toronto gets thrown in jail ? not just arrested, not even just convicted, but jailed ? there is absolutely no way to get him out of there. Clearly, that is a significant flaw in our legislative processes.

The electorate should have access to a method by which they can turf someone from office, but I also think this should be a very difficult thing to do ? for the obvious reason that as politics is a nasty business, we'd end up in perpetual campaign mode with no one running the ship as captain after captain gets thrown overboard.

The most popular method for addressing this issue is recall. In simplest terms, it means if a sufficient number of folks feel that the official is not fulfilling their responsibilities, then a recall election can be called and the electorate can vote again for the position. Usually, in order for a petition to recall to succeed, there must be support from at least 50% of the voters (those that voted in the election ? not all potential voters). The only province that has this mechanism is BC. Thus far there hasn't been a successful recall petition, but the fact that it is there, and a possibility, is to my mind a good thing.

The political classes make much noise about the need for better engagement of the electorate, but the current system is a rigged game. We know it. They know it. Until someone does something about it, the calls for greater public political participation will continue to meet with the stony silence of a justifiably apathetic electorate.

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