

POLITICS AS USUAL: Water, Water Everywhere

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Chances are, if your day has been like mine, you have used water multiple times.

You turned a tap and water came out in abundance.

You pushed a button and cascading water rushed in to wash your clothes or your dishes. The water arrives in and leaves your home easily, with little thought or consideration. It's doubtful that any of us think about water at all except perhaps when we get our bill ? a bill that seems to increase substantially every time we look around.

Indeed, water rates have risen substantially over the past five years.

There are concerns that the average citizen can't afford to continue to pay these ever increasing utility bills. Local politicians promise to ?do something? about these sky-rocketing costs. What that ?something? is, remains somewhat murky.

Our bills do indeed continue to rise. Businesses and homeowners alike are faced with serious cost implications of rising water prices. It does represent a hardship.

It is a hardship that is sure to increase ? perhaps exponentially ? within the next decade. Why? Truth be told we do not pay the true cost of our water. As a consequence, we will need to come to terms with the reality of what our water truly costs.

While water may not be, in the strictest sense, a finite resource, it is a scare resource and it is that scarcity of supply that is the cause for concern.

Many parts of the globe are currently experiencing a prolonged period of severe droughts and severely limited access to potable water. The human misery that results from this scarcity is unimaginable.

Major media report that California is in the midst of the worst drought it has ever seen. A number of other states ? especially those that rely on the fast depleting Ogallala Aquifer ? are in similarly dire straits. Over two million people rely on that aquifer for water ? with concerns that less than two decades' worth of water is left.

Here in Canada, some parts of BC and Alberta have had multiple years of water woes with consequent impacts to their economies. Even in York Region we have had multiple years of phase II water bans.

Impacts of droughts reach far beyond national borders. Prime agricultural lands are rendered bone-dry unable to support even meagre crop growth.

The decline in agricultural output in drought affected countries has severe implications for global food prices ? and fuel if one includes grain-based ethanol production.

Canadians enjoy an apparent abundance of fresh water. I submit to you that this apparent abundance is a mirage. Water levels in the Great Lakes have been declining for years. Anyone who has a cottage, or engages in a water sport, can tell you that. But it isn't just dropping levels that are a concern. There are real threats to our continued access to and sovereignty of the water that is already there.

The water sucking colossus to the south of us ? our American neighbours and free trade partners ? are thirsty. They want our water. There's even a plan afoot to build a pipeline from the Great Lakes that will divert water to the agricultural fields of the US. Thus, the time will come, and come soon, where there will be fights over access to our freshwater.

To me, bulk water exports are the most significant concern. In public submissions concerning Bill 99 (about protecting the health of Lake Simcoe), a number of delegates ? myself included ? raised the issue that the lake was not sufficiently protected from water extraction and bulk water exports.

We asked for strengthened language that would guard against large scale water extraction activities on Lake Simcoe.

As we approach this year of elections, the electorate has the opportunity to ask eager candidates what they're going to do about our water. It's not enough to promise bringing down your water rates. Any drop in rates will be temporary. It's political hucksterism to suggest otherwise.

Press them on the more important question: ?What are you going to do to protect our water?? Let's hope the new crop of candidates have an answer.

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