

By Bill Rea ? Don?t limit terms

There are some issues that appear in the main media occasionally that act as a stimulant into my tired, old frame.

One such issue was raised in the Toronto Star recently, addressing an matter on which I have always had strong feelings. But like most people who were born with brains, the more I think about such issues, the more my passion adjusts, and the more I reflect. That's good, because in this case, my position returns to from where it started.

There was an item in the Star last week about Toronto City Councillor Mary Margaret McMahon announcing that she would not seek another term in next year's municipal elections. That would be in keeping with the promise she made in 2010, that if elected, she would only serve two terms.

This same councillor wrote a column for the Star that was published a couple days before, and I will grant she made a compelling case for restricting the number of terms that a City councillor in Toronto should be allowed to serve. It certainly is a good way to ensure a constant turnover on a council, and keeping doors open to new views and ideas, not to mention providing a variation in the talent pool on a council

Incidentally, her ward is in an area where I used to work. Pity the company I had been working for went under. I think I would have enjoyed covering her political career. She's an advocate for ranked ballots, which politically qualifies her as one of my bestest buddies.

But I have never been a fan of limiting term limits for elected officials, and I never will.

There is a very simple reason for that position. I believe in democracy. I therefore believe that the electorate should be allowed to decide who represents them, with minimal influence from statutes or legislation.

There are many people who believe that politicians should be restricted in terms of how long they can serve. I know there's a school of thought that advocates voting against incumbents at election time. My late father, in the last couple of years of his life, became very vocal as he advocated that position.

?Vote the buggers out!? my old man used to declare, with a respectable amount of passion.

And indeed, there are precedents.

American presidents are allowed to serve only two terms in the White House. That means Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama are deemed over qualified for the job. If I were an American, I think I would find that a little bothersome. The law of the land would dictate to me that there are three worthy potential candidates who I would not be allowed to vote for.

The law was brought in while Harry Truman was president. Republicans did not like the fact that his predecessor Franklin Roosevelt had been elected to four terms (though he only served three and a bit). They wanted to make sure that didn't happen again. The wonderful irony of that was since the rule came in while Truman was in office, he was exempt. The first president barred from seeking a third term was Republican Dwight Eisenhower, and he probably could have won, had he been able (Truman later reflect that if Richard Nixon came as close as he did to beating John F. Kennedy in 1960, Eisenhower would have done it easily).

I will admit there have been benefits to Americans from limiting their presidents to two terms max. I doubt Ronald Reagan would have emerged from the Iran-Contra affair as unscathed as he did had been eligible to seek another term. Bill Clinton had a little more than two years left in his presidency when he was impeached. Everyone knew he'd be out of everyone's hair in a couple of years. How differently would things have gone had that not been the case?

As well, it is true that a lot of people have held elected office for a lot longer than they should have. I have been covering politicians at various levels and various locations for more than 33 years. I have seen people hold office for one term and I believed it was one too many. I have seen people hold office for years after their best-before date. I have not always liked what I've seen in the political arena, but I have always understood why things happened ? the voters made it happen. And in a democracy, are they not the people who are supposed to call the shots?

Looking at this from the position of a constituent, which I happen to be, among other things, if I'm happy with the representation I have been receiving from my area or regional councillor, my mayor, my school trustee, MP or MPP, and if these people are prepared to continue representing me, I see no reason why I should not have the option of voting for them. And I see no justification in being told that I can't.

McMahon told her constituents seven years ago that if elected, she would serve for eight years. She is evidently prepared to keep her word on that. Good for her. It is her call.

Actually, I have known a couple of elected officials who have committed themselves to two terms and no more. But most of the politicians I have known over the years have been prepared to serve as long as the voters would have them.

And that concept is key to this issue. The voters decide who they will have in office.

Hazel McCallion served as mayor of Mississauga for 36 years. It could be argued she accomplished that because of her skill as a politician, the force of her personality or other attributes she possesses. But it all comes down to a simple explanation. McCallion was in office for as long as she was because her constituents wanted her there.

Some day somebody will have to tell me exactly what's wrong with that

