

Bill Rea ? Don?t cut representation

Since we are all human beings, there are some things that make us angry.

We individually get infuriated by different things. Some of us are very slow to anger. Other really extreme cases fly off the handle at seemingly trivial things. I have sometimes joked that about the only thing that caused my late father to get angry was exposure to an oxygen atmosphere.

In my case, there are some things that I have next to no patience for. One of them is people, especially people who are supposedly in the ?know,? who try and feed me some line that cutting the number of people elected to represent me at some level of government is somehow going to save me money.

I'm not buying, and I never have.

Reducing the number of elected offices does little more than shut up opposition (usually the motivation behind such efforts) and make it harder for ordinary people to get further involved in the system.

The line that it saves money is rubbish.

I was at Queen's Park the day some years ago when then Premier Mike Harris was announcing the number of seats at the Legislature would be cut. He even set up a photo opportunity that some might have thought clever, involving a bunch of chairs loaded on a flatbed trailer, with the Preem himself loading up the last one. I thought the whole affair at the time, including the notion itself and the photo-op, was pure cosmetics, and certainly not an exercise in democracy.

There's a group in Toronto that appears ready to cut the size of the council in that municipality, and they have evidently found out that if they get enough signatures on a petition calling for a reduction in the number of councillors, the City will be compelled to deal with the issue, and if council doesn't do it fast enough, the matter can end up before the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), where the matter will be decided, with the decision at that level being final.

There are some out there who would call that process democratic, and the day you or I are allowed to vote for OMB members, I might believe that.

That procedure is actually nothing new.

It was about 20 years ago, when a group of residents in Caledon got together to try and lobby for lower municipal taxes, and they were led by some people whose commitment to lower taxes was, at best, debatable. These guys came up with the idea that eliminating the positions of area representatives on council (there were five of them in those days) would somehow save the taxpayers money. These efforts were joined by a couple of Bolton residents who got involved in the issue, and the whole matter ended up before OMB.

Fortunately, the good guys won and the move to cut the size of council failed.

The real interesting part of this whole affair was there was little effort made to find out what the people paying for the whole institution (namely the taxpayers) really thought about all of this.

Yes, people were approached to sign a petition. But what does that really prove, apart from the fact these people know how to write their names down? Many people will sign petitions, not really appreciating the position they're being asked to back. Those circulating these documents are pushing agendas of their own, so it stands to reason they are not likely to be terribly objective. If the sales pitch is good, the second or so it takes someone to sign a petition is not that significant. And there will be people who will sign a petition to get the person brandishing the clipboard off their backs.

It doesn't take a lot of thought to reach a conclusion that reducing the number of elected positions might cut costs, but it takes somewhat more thought to do the rest of the equation, and reach a significantly different conclusion.

True, there might be some short-term savings, but long-term consequences.

Taking the Toronto situation as an example, there are 44 members of the council right now (not counting the mayor), and the push, as I understand it, is to get that reduced to 25.

You cut your payroll by 19 people, there are going to be savings, for a time. Pretty soon, the 25 who are still there are going to realize that their workloads have increased, and they're going to expect salary increases (with justification too). There goes some of those savings that had been realized. They're going to want bigger staffs too, and the money to cover that is going to come from somewhere.

Then we start thinking about the quality of representation we get, and who's available to represent us.

Reducing the size of a council will make it harder for people to get on it, thus reducing the talent pool. Some people might call that a good thing, but I'm not in that group.

When there are several seats available, it's possible for people to come forward and run for one of them, treating it as a part-time job,

yet offering their insights on what might be best for the community.

In Caledon's case, we have area councillors. These people are paid, but not making livings through their municipal work. They are, however, able to offer some of their time to serving the community and adding their personal perspectives to discussions at the council table. Reducing the number of positions costs the community that input. I don't see it as a bargain.

When I first went to work in Toronto (about 19 years ago) I stayed mostly in what was then the Borough of East York, but I also hung around what was then the City of Toronto, as it was in those days. There were 16 wards in the city, with a councillor in each, making a full-time salary, and a couple of calls to see that number reduced. I created a brief stink in my zone of influence at the time when I suggested the number of wards (and consequently councillors) be doubled, with the salaries cut in half.

Even the greatest of ideas can die before their time.

But when it comes to the composition of the councils of the big municipalities (and I fear we could well see it in Caledon eventually), there is one inescapable reality ? It won't matter a damn what the electorate has to say. When it comes right down to it, municipalities are appendages of the Province, and the governments at Queen's Park call the shots. I've learned that a number of times, such as with the creation of what is commonly known as the 'megacity,' when the six entities that made up Metropolitan Toronto were merged into one municipal entity, and to hell with what the people living and paying taxes in the area might have thought.

Economics will never decide issues such as this one. It will always be Provincial politics

