

Bill Rea ? I thought it would happen

There are some people in this world who will start a sentence with the words ?I hate to say I told you so.?

I hope there are few dumb enough to believe such statements, because they are seldom true.

They are normally used to open a sentence in which the speaker will go to some lengths to stress why he or she is delighted to say, ?I told you so.?

I'm not like that. When I have the urge to say, ?I told you so? to someone, it's usually with a great deal of satisfaction.

I've been feeling that a lot over the last week or so with the release of a report that states that municipal amalgamation has not been the howling success that we were told it would be.

It's a topic that's always been rather close to my heart. I spent a whole year of my working life writing about its advent. And a couple of years after it came about, I was holding it up as an example of what needs to be fixed when it comes to municipal government. In a nutshell, I believe getting the Provincial government to keep its big proverbial snoot out of municipal democracy would be a giant step in the right direction.

Alas, that's not likely to happen.

The Toronto Star did a story about the report from Timothy Cobban, a political science professor at Western University. The upshot of it all is acknowledgement that amalgamation reduced the number of municipalities, although people will probably debate whether that's a good or bad thing forever. But in economic terms, few are the people who are financially ahead in the deal. It looks like municipal employees are among those few people, because the number of staffers has increased.

When it comes to municipal amalgamation, I am most familiar with the creation of what is commonly called the ?megacity,? which is also currently also known as Toronto.

I was working there in the late 1990s, concentrating most of my efforts in what in those days was Canada's only borough, East York, while also spending time in parts of what used to be the City of Toronto component in the Metro scheme of things. There was a lot of hard work in those days, but there was an eclectic value to being a community newspaper editor in such an urban setting. I also got to know some interesting people, such as Metro councillors (at the time) like David Miller and the late Jack Layton, not to mention an aspiring politician named Kathleen Wynne (more about her later).

It was late in 1996 that the Progressive Conservative government of Premier Mike Harris dropped not-so-subtle hints that they were thinking of merging the six municipalities in Metro into one city. This was pretty much out of the blue.

Since the early days of the Common Sense Revolution (while Bob Rae was still Premier), the avid conservative who was myself was a big supporter of what Harris was trying to sell the voters. Owing to the nature of my job, I was obliged to temper how enthusiastic I got in print. The 1995 election was in the offing, and I was still the new editor on the block.

As that election campaign progressed, I found I was a lot better at my job than I had thought. My boss was getting irate phone calls from people demanding I be fired for my obviously anti-Tory bias. The election wasn't long in the history books before that same boss told me she was getting irate calls demanding I be fired for my obviously pro-Tory bias (I can't remember, but I hope I had the good sense to ask for a raise when she told me that).

There was much that I admired about the Harris government in those days. The main things I opposed were his plans to scrap photo radar (an appeal to a segment of the electorate I had little admiration for), cutting the number of seats in the legislature at Queen's Park (cosmetic) and eliminating the Metro level of government (silly).

I know there are a lot of people who never had any use for Harris, and other people like me who lost respect for him. But I defy anyone to name an elected official who kept as many promises as he did; even the bad ones.

I didn't like his idea of scrapping Metro, but when he tossed that in favour of the megacity, I really started losing respect for Harris.

Part of my problem was with the argument that it would cut the number of municipal office holders, thus saving the taxpayers money. I get livid when I hear people tell me that cutting my political representation is going to save me money. There might be some bucks saved in the short-term, with fewer salaries to pay. But that will soon be offset by the remaining elected officials demanding bigger paycheques because of their increased workload. And then there would be calls for more support staff, etc. It simply ain't a money-saver.

Besides, I think it's undemocratic to reduce representation, especially at the municipal level. My main problem with it is it reduces the talent pool available. Full-time elected officials have their place. I expect my prime minister, for example, to focus the bulk of his attention on the job at hand. I don't expect Stephen Harper to take up a paper route to supplement his income.

But at the municipal level, there is room for part-time councillors; people who have day jobs on which they depend, but can also take on some civic responsibilities. They have the ability to bring a certain down-to-earth reality to the council table debates.

Caledon has benefited from such councillors for years; from the likes of advertising executives like the late John Alexander, school principals like the late George Wright, grocers like Bob Cannon, firefighters like Rob Mezzapelli and a host of other people who took and have taken time from their farms to address local issues. Political partisanship notwithstanding, would someone please explain to me how the community suffers from such input?

I realize there are a lot of people who would like to see the number of elected officials reduced, I'm in the opposite camp. Even if it saves a little money in the short-term, I don't think it's worth it. As I have often stated, democracy was meant to be many things, and dirt cheap isn't one of them

The real problem I had with municipal amalgamation (Harris style) was the in-your-face way he did it. No matter how good the idea seemed on paper, I have been told this is a democracy, meaning the voters (who also pay the taxes that go into the Premier's paycheque) are supposed to call the shots. And it is a fact that the electorate was opposed to the idea.

The government of the day refused to hold a referendum, but one was organized from the grass roots. Harris, who kept a residence near the Provincial capital, himself granted the referendum legitimacy by voting in it (that's a matter of public record).

I covered that referendum, attending weekly meetings of the group formed to oppose amalgamation, which called itself Citizens 4 Local Democracy (C4LD). Two of the main movers behind the group were former Toronto mayor John Sewell and Wynne (yes, that Wynne).

Voting day was March 3, 1997, and there were two post-vote rallies for the 'no' side; one at Toronto City Hall and the other at Massey Hall, just a couple of blocks away. I was able to get to both, and I well remember running up and down the very steep stairs at Massey Hall, talking to people or seeking camera angles (I don't think I could handle those stairs today). Wynne was prominent on stage that night.

There were no rallies for the 'yes' side that night. None were needed. Harris had a majority in those days, meaning he had the authority to do whatever he wanted, public opinion be damned. And that's just what he did.

The amalgamation idea was never fully thought out, as subsequent events demonstrated. Cobban's report adds proof.

But it's hardly a surprise. I could have told you that 17 years ago.

In fact, I did

