

Bill Rea ? Keep area councillors

The municipal elections are history, and we are soon to start trying to live with what a little more than a third of the electorate wanted.

The voter turnout figures were pretty depressing ? No, make that sickening. According to figures released by the Town, 16,264 of the 47,485 eligible voters actually bothered to get out and vote. That works out to 34.25 per cent.

True, some people might have had unexpected illnesses, or urgent commitments that came up at the last minute ? such things do happen. There might have been others who had trouble deciding who to vote for, so opted for the foolish alternative of not voting at all.

But I think the reality is the vast majority of the 31,221 people who didn't vote simply didn't give a damn about the community in which they live and support through their tax dollars.

And the worst offenders were in Bolton; Caledon's largest population centre, which is also the location of two of the most contentious issues in the recent campaign ? the massive Canadian Tire development and matters involving traffic. There were 16,310 people in Bolton who could have voted, and only 5,362 who actually did. A worthy incumbent was defeated in that ward. True, Annette Groves got more votes than Patti Foley, meaning she's rightly been elected. But only 16.41 per cent of the electorate voted for Groves. That's a really not much of a mandate, especially considering it was a two-way race. I wonder how many Ward 5 voters are really pleased with the way things turned out.

There were other incumbents who were defeated. Richard Paterak lost to Barb Shaughnessy in Ward 1. While that's the ward with the highest voter turnout, 36.93 per cent is nothing for anyone to brag about. I'm wondering about the 4,957 Ward 1 voters who didn't bother to vote.

Those figures are shameful, particularly when one considers there were some pretty thoughtful ideas put forth by some of the candidates. I thought Mark Radford, running in Ward 2, had an interesting idea when he suggested a tracking ticket system being imposed at Town Hall in an effort to improve customer service. That was one issue that was brought up a lot at the various all-candidates' meetings I attended. I'm not sure how workable Radford's idea might be, but I think it certainly deserves some study. Good ideas don't necessarily have to come from people who win elections.

On the other hand, there were some ideas raised in the campaign that should be studied, and then scrapped.

One candidate suggested doing away with the area seats on Town council.

There are a couple of problems with that notion, not the least of which is that very idea was suggested about 20 years ago and it failed, as well it should have.

There are some who say that cutting the number of elected representatives on any body will inevitably save the taxpayers money. I get angry when I hear that argument because I know it's nonsense, but I also know there are a lot of people out there who believe it. Granted, there might be some tax benefits in the short term, but they would soon be offset by the remaining councillors calling for pay hikes because of their expanded workloads, and maybe additional support staff as well.

Besides, cutting the number of positions is largely cosmetic anyway.

Not too many years ago, during Mike Harris's first term as Premier of Ontario, he brought in legislation erroneously dubbed The Fewer Politicians Act (he didn't reduce the number of politicians; just the number of offices available for them to seek). I was working at papers in Toronto in those days (1996), and drove down to Queen's Park for the announcement of the pending legislation (since Harris had a majority, its passage was never in question). It reduced the number of seats in the legislature from 130 to 103, meaning Ontario taxpayers were to see their provincial representation cut by 27. For the photo op, the Preem arranged for a flatbed trailer to be parked in front of the main building at Queen's Park, with 26 chairs on it. He himself placed the 27th chair on the rig (I think he thought it was symbolic ? I thought it was silly).

And he told us it was going to save oodles of money, which I don't think it did.

That had been the logic put forward some 20 years ago by the local Taxpayers Coalition when they called for getting rid of the area council positions. Some of you might remember the Coalition. It was started by a group of grass-root local residents who were concerned about alarming tax rates on their municipal bills in the early 1990s, but it was soon taken over by people who couldn't have cared less about taxes, but were very interested in getting rid of certain officials with the Town. In those days, it was the education component that was behind the major tax increases, but the Coalition made not a peep about that, largely I think because taxes really weren't part of their agenda.

They got up a petition with the necessary signatures in support of the move to get rid of area councillors, but when people started learning the truth about the idea, especially the fact that the savings were something of a myth, it wasn't hard to get more signatures

on a petition opposing it.

The point is when people are given the clear facts about an issue like this, they usually respond accordingly. The downside of that reality is sometimes people get only half the story and still go with it.

My real opposition to the idea of cutting the number of municipal officials is it narrows the scope for discussion.

Assume for a moment that Caledon council consisted of just Regional representatives. That would mean it would consist of a mayor and four councillors. Quorum for meetings would probably be three people, meaning crucial decisions on things like budgets, tax rates, development proposals and long-range planning could conceivably be made by just two people.

If that sounds like a good idea to you, see your doctor.

We hear a lot of complaints these days about full-time politicians. Why, then, would anyone be in favour of making sure all Town councillors are full time. The area reps are considered part-time councillors. True some are retired from their regular jobs, meaning they have more time to devote to their municipal duties, but they are still paid for part-time service. And some of them work. Nick deBoer still farms, and Rob Mezzapelli's full time job is fighting fires in Toronto. Yet Mezzapelli frequently comes across at council meetings as being one of the best prepared of the bunch.

People might not be able to carry out both their Town and Regional duties while holding down a ?day job,? and asking people to halt their careers in the interest of public service is going too far. That would mean the talent pool available to sit on council would be reduced, and someone is going to have to do a lot of talking before they convince me that's a benefit.

Besides, the larger the council, the more points of view that can be expressed during debate. We're always hearing people complaining that issues aren't discussed enough at council. Frankly, I'm at a loss to understand how reducing the size of council is going to improve that.

Yes, it does cost some dollars to have area councillors, but it is reality there is value from those dollars. It is also a reality that democracy was meant to be many desirable things, and dirt cheap is not one of them.

