

Exercising your democratic privilege

by MARK PAVILONS

The air is abuzz with electioneering here and south of the border.

It won't be long before harsh TV and radio ads appear, in an attempt to disparage this party or that.

Before the rigged carnival ball throw game of politics gets into high gear, there is plenty average citizens and voters can do.

Abe Lincoln stressed that "elections belong to the people. It's their decision. If they decide to turn their back on the fire and burn their behinds, then they will just have to sit on their blisters."

How true.

My son gets himself worked up over many Canadian and world issues. He sees the injustice, inequity and greed of it all.

He's never been a politician animal and I don't think he's ever voted. We encourage him each and every time.

I tell him being aware of the issues is the first step in being a "concerned citizen."

Learning about the issues, from all sides, is the next step.

He meticulously reads about everything before forming his rather strong opinions. I'm not sure where he gets his information from, but I warn him (and everyone) to seek out several sources. Every source you read will, however, be biased in some way. That's a given. But if you know that going in, you are somewhat prepared.

If you are bored and disgusted by politics and don't bother to vote, you are in effect voting for the entrenched Establishments of the two major parties, who please rest assured are not dumb, and who are keenly aware that it is in their interests to keep you disgusted and bored and cynical and to give you every possible reason to stay at home doing one-hitters and watching MTV on primary day. By all means stay home if you want, but don't bullshit yourself that you're not voting. In reality, there is no such thing as not voting: you either vote by voting, or you vote by staying home and tacitly doubling the value of some diehard's vote, according to David Foster Wallace.

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said the real safeguard of democracy is education.

Being in the journalism biz, I've seen so many governments and politicians come and go. I have heard it all.

I recall our first female Prime Minister, and the one and only provincial NDP government. I have seen great speakers and not-so-great ones.

I have even entered the fray myself, running for a Peel regional council seat representing Bolton.

And I have covered countless local and regional council meetings, watching local representatives in action.

I still, to this day, contend that most get into politics for genuine reasons, the foremost being to serve and to try to make a difference.

Of course, once in office, many things impact that ability and individual effect.

I try to tell my excitable son that within parties and our Parliamentary system, there are protocols, levels of bureaucracy, strategies, party alliances and more. It's a lot more complicated than it appears on the surface.

A lot of the younger voters may still not understand that we don't vote for party leader or Prime Minister, but rather our local MP or MPP. They, in turn, contribute to their respective party.

Numbers mean everything in House when it comes to voting on legislation.

In Canada, the current federal Liberals have all the cards, and with NDP support, yield a lot of power.

My son asks whether a certain leader can be impeached, or kicked out of office. I tell him that typically, that comes with a vote of non-confidence in the House, most often following a budget. Here, ousting a leader isn't as easy as it sounds. The Governor General can, in fact, appoint a Prime Minister, and remove one from office, given the proper set of circumstances.

My son did pose a very interesting question: if voters put everyone in office, shouldn't voters have a say in who should stay and who should go?

Why yes, that happens at election time. But could there be a mechanism to hold leaders accountable, at every stage of their tenure? Could they be rated or graded in some way?

All good questions, and fair in democratic terms. But sadly, no.

The judging and voting comes every four or so years.

We the people have the power and we have to exercise it, en masse, to make a difference.

Apathy is our main enemy in a democracy, and the numbers over the years continue to decline.

I get it, people are concerned with their lives, cost of living, making ends meet, getting or keeping a job and paying their bills. Do average citizens have time to join a political party, get accustomed to party platforms and rally support?

As the numbers indicate, no.

I know that people can get really passionate about issues and party performance. There are many current issues locally where this is the case. One thing I will give our citizenry is they are very well prepared, have done their homework, and get organized. That's the very definition of an informed populace.

But is it enough?

Strong, defensible positions are not always no-brainers.

I have witnessed so many strong, articulated arguments get defeated that it sometimes make you sigh and shrug your shoulders. It has, I'm sure, made many lose faith in the system. But we can't.

We are part of it, whether we like it or not. Strong opinions often become rallying cries and these sometimes lead to change.

Some of the most historic upheavals have come from the grassroots, the people.

Just as it should be.

So, what to do?

Be informed, be educated, listen, read and decide.

And don't get your butt burned as Abe recommended.