

Finding 'the one' at the bus stop

by BROCK WEIR

The ballots are counted, the dust has settled, and now it's time to open new chapters in our communities as the 2018-2022 Councils wind down this week and the newly-elected or re-elected members of the 2022-2026 Councils prepare to find their seats at the table.

For those who will be saying goodbye, it's a time to reflect back on the contributions they have made at the municipal level. For those who will be taking up the mantle of public service in this context for the very first time, it's a hopeful time as they look to find their feet, raise their voices for the causes close to the hearts of themselves and their constituents, and look for ways to achieve the promises and commitments they have made on the campaign trail.

They will do so knowing they have the support of voters behind them; but I suspect that, for some, having the support of the voters will be just a little bittersweet as so many constituents, for whatever reason, couldn't find the interest, inclination or value in casting their vote through any of the channels available to them.

While the dust has indeed settled, the forensics are still very much underway with candidates, pollsters, and election-organizers alike looking at just why the issues of taxes, development, roads, waste pickup, snow plowing, and more, failed to proverbially set the community on fire, leaving roughly 60 to 70 per cent of Ontario voters to sit this one out.

Just as they did the Provincial election this past June.

In the last Provincial trip to the ballot box, just 43.5 per cent of those eligible decided to go along for the ride, the lowest Provincial Election turnout in Ontario's history

The result gave Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives 40.82 per cent of the vote, compared to the NDP's 23.74, the Liberals' 23.85, and the Green Party's 5.96 per cent. When looking at the figures in this way, the PCs were swept back into power with a comfortable majority. But, in the grand scheme of things, garnering nearly 41 per cent of less than 44 per cent of eligible voters is a far less decisive proposition the way our current governance model stands.

This means quite a small percentage of voters gave a mandate to a government which, in the purported bid to keep kids in schools, decided to invoke the oft-maligned and sometime-misused Notwithstanding Clause to run roughshod over rights enshrined in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms until this past Monday when, enticed by the Government's offer to rescind the move if workers called off their strike, CUPE met the Province in a photo finish to see who blinked first.

All with nary a word from the self-professed fighters for our freedoms who didn't see the need to clog the city blocks around Queen's Park for the duration of this mess with their freedom barbecues, freedom hot tub soaks, and, hell, maybe even freedom fries to stay energized in the quest to preserve the Charter. Funny, that.

As I write this, our neighbours to the south are preparing to cast their votes in the American mid-term elections, the results of which will likely ricochet around the world.

With voters' rights and access to polls under severe challenge and, in some cases, experiencing voter intimidation we rarely see in the western democratic world, people from all sides are doing their damndest to make sure their voices are heard.

And kudos to them. The importance of free and fair elections is not lost on them.

It's just a shame it seems lost on us.

By and large, we don't have these intimidation tactics to contend with when we go to mark our ballot. Our systems are relatively stable, we know what to do, and maybe we take it for granted. But there is truth in the adage that you don't know what you have until it's gone.

In the context of the U.S. election, an American friend recently posted a meme which I think speaks aptly to our situation.

The quote, attributed to advocate Mohamad Safa, states: 'Best voting advice: Voting isn't marriage. It's public transport. You're not waiting for 'the one.' You're getting on the bus. And if there isn't one going to your destination, you don't stay home and sulk. You take the one that is going closest to where you want to be.'

It's great advice and also a great observation.

It wasn't all that long ago when we cast our votes based on the vision each incumbent or aspiring leader had for our community, our Province, or our nation. A leader's fiscal policy may be appealing, for example, but their environmental record less so. Would the benefits of their fiscal policy outweigh the shortcomings on the green front enough for said leader to earn your vote? That doesn't seem something that is considered all that often anymore.

Do they have practical ideas on how to tackle the housing crisis? Great if they do, but what about that one comment they made 10 years ago that might not align with (a) the values we hold today? Do the benefits of the housing plan override that one blemish you see on their record?

Do they have the right priorities for the community, but different priorities for social media? What's more important to you?

Do they have the finger on the pulse of what the people want but, in your eye, might be somewhat hindered by an arbitrary age threshold? Is the latter something you can look past?

I shared my views last week on the echo chambers we are seeing people take more and more comfort in, particularly online, but that's not only a matter for public discourse; I think it is having an impact on the polls as well.

Everyone votes for different reasons, for different candidates, for different visions of the community, but no candidate or vision is ever perfect, nor will they dovetail perfectly with your own vision.

No candidate will ever reflect your values to the letter, or will they perfectly fit into the very personal mould each of us has in our mind's eye for the ideal leader.

It simply doesn't work like that, nor will it ever.

'There's no one to vote for,' is a familiar refrain whenever we're asked to go to the polls at any level of government. But that's far from the truth; while a candidate is individually important, just as important is what they offer and determining how what they offer is one further step towards the overall vision you have for your town, province, and country.

Too many opportunities have been lost just waiting for the right bus. It's time to consider the full journey to the ultimate destination.