

Why bother? Here's why.

by BROCK WEIR

Easter is one of my favourite holidays.

While the religious aspect is the main element of the observance, for many it's a time to gather with loved ones, break bread, have an egg hunt or two with some of the young'uns, and, yes, indulge in a bit of well-deserved chocolate ? I mean, it's only April, but I think we can all agree it's been a long year!

Another bonus is it's often seen as the unofficial start of spring, particularly when Easter is on the earlier side of things.

No matter your own personal approach to Easter, it's a time of renewal and rejuvenation, and that's always something to be celebrated.

When it comes to renewal and rejuvenation, people usually have warmer weather, more sun, and the return of birds, flowers, and foliage in mind. That's all valid, and I share in that, but I hope this spirit of renewal and rejuvenation will eventually turn to our civic engagement.

People often joke that when you gather for dinner, there are a few topics that should generally be avoided ? with politics, religion, and sex usually among the top five ? but, in our current climate, it's hard to avoid that first one, and my family is no exception.

Conversation turned to politics pretty quickly, with some of the assembled crowd looking forward to the U.S. midterm elections and the change that could potentially bring to the United States and the world. From there, discussion shifted to whether or not we were taking the very idea of midterms decidedly for granted.

It was a fair point. It seems that goalposts are constantly shifting south of our border, along with the justifications for doing so. But, while so many of us are focused on the U.S. political climate, whether out of fascination, horror, or with some degree of amusement (I don't understand that last one, personally), it's a shame we are not collectively as engaged and focused in our own political climate here at home.

On April 2, just before the start of the Easter long weekend, the Province of Ontario announced a potentially significant shift in our governance structure.

Should the Better Regional Governance Act 2026 be adopted, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing will have the power to appoint upper-tier Council Chairs in eight jurisdictions, including Simcoe County, where such positions were elected by the general public or appointed by the duly-elected Regional Council. In areas like York and Peel Regions where the Minister had the power for the outgoing term of Council only, this power will be expanded into the future.

Moreover, the appointed chairs will be granted ?Strong Chair? powers to ?help them deliver on government priorities, such as housing and infrastructure.?

?We will always support our municipal partners, both lower- and upper-tier, in delivering locally-led solutions that offer value for taxpayers and speed up decision-making,? said Rob Flack, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. ?These changes provide the necessary tools for local leadership to advance our shared priorities and better serve our communities, including by expediting housing and infrastructure development.?

I don't see how the changes support municipal partners at either tier or, for that matter, local leadership in any way. In my opinion, it simply seems to be another step in upending municipal government as we know it.

Over the 2022-2026 term of Council, communities like ours were granted Strong Mayor powers by the Province, ostensibly to give Heads of Council the ability to unilaterally shape municipal departments, advance Provincial priorities, and, most importantly and controversially, the ability to override decisions made by the majority of Council if they don't align with said Provincial priorities.

Many of the Mayors at the receiving end of such powers have used them ? the justification for doing so depending on who you talk to and what political allegiances you might have ? in the face of decisions made by their duly-elected Council colleagues, creating a fraught situation going into this year's municipal election.

Concerns aren't unjustified.

Candidates who put themselves forward to represent their community in the 2022 municipal election did so to foster change, make a difference, represent the views of their ward constituents, and, if they liked the way things were going, do their best to maintain Council momentum.

Those seeking re-election or considering a first-time run for a Council seat can be forgiven if they hesitate before making a final decision to put their name on the ballot when the process begins next month.

If the work they do on behalf of their constituents can be overridden by the Strong Mayor of their Town or City, with the vague notion of ?Provincial Priorities,? it's perfectly understandable if they feel the urge to step back and ask, ?Why bother??

Now, we've got a new wrinkle.

Should Regional Chairs be ultimately granted Strong Chair powers, where does that leave our Strong Mayors should their own definitions of ?Provincial Priorities? clash? Well, the Region is called an ?upper tier? municipality for a reason, so the decision of the Strong Chair would, one supposes, naturally win the day, regardless of the views of the Strong Mayor, the Council in question, and the residents who put them there.

Say what you will about Strong Mayor powers ? and you do ? but at least those feats of ?strength? are being wielded by individuals who were duly elected by the citizens they represent. Not so the Strong Chairs who will be directly appointed by the Ministry, regardless of their experience, their ties to the Regions they will lead, or the issues of the day.

Will mayoral candidates, incumbent or otherwise, one day find themselves also asking, ?Why bother?? as well?

One group that is certainly asking, ?Why bother?? are potential school trustee candidates.

Whether they're ?former? trustees from the Peel District School Board or the York Catholic District School Board who have been unceremoniously discarded by the Ministry of Education in favour of a Ministry-appointed supervisor, or active and engaged parents hoping to step up for the first time and represent the voices of other engaged parents and guardians at the table, they don't know at press time if there will even be a position to run for.

Maybe the question they're asking isn't, ?Why bother?? but rather, ?What's the point??

It's a fair question, and one can only hope the question itself isn't the point.

But the point and the reason to bother is to ensure our collective voices are heard.

Thursday's announcement is just the latest example where local voices are at risk of being diminished all for the sake of ?Provincial Priorities.? While the latest efforts to dismiss trustees, blunt the power of a Councillor's vote, and now undermine the powers so recently bestowed to Strong Mayors might be disheartening, it's more important than ever before to put yourselves forward, fight

back, and ensure the voices of our community members continue to have an impact.

It can only be hoped that the U.S. midterm elections go ahead this year as anticipated and as enshrined by law; by a similar token, it can only be hoped the Provincial Government doesn't see the 2030 Municipal Election as another hurdle in the way of its ?priorities.?