

BROCK'S BANTER: Bringing In The Vote

By Brock Weir

Despite numerous public meetings held throughout the fall, the Federal government disappointed many people who voted for them across the country when they shelved any plans they were considering on electoral reform.

Voters, particularly those skewing younger, had a degree of anger when they realised the change so many of them had voted for ? a serious overhauling of our current First Past the Post system in favour of one formula or another of proportional representation ? would be consigned to the books for another government to pick up the gauntlet.

Personally, I was not one of the people left listless by the Government washing its hands of this matter, at least for now. First Past the Post, in my opinion, has served us adequately (I'll stop short of saying 'well?') since this country's inception 150 years ago, and no clear formula preferred by the majority seemed to rise for the top.

Whatever iteration those clamoring for change might have had in mind, their respective pros and cons had been tangibly demonstrated. Yes, more voices from various sides were invariably in the mix, helping to steer policies and, with the dilution of a two-, three-, or four-party system, smaller parties, representing more specialized interests, were often the kingmakers in a coalition government, enabling their voices at the table where they matter the most.

And yet, in countries like Belgium, to pick but one example, these types of systems have led to stalemates in the formation of a majority of government ? bringing together a coalition of minor parties along with one or two of the larger representations ? after intense negotiation and bartering on all sides. These situations have left the nation in states of limbo, uncertain just what is next for their valued democracy.

Perhaps we dodged a bullet here in Canada, but it is undeniable that there is, in most quarters, an appetite for change ? whatever form that change happens to take.

Change is, of course, often hard to accept. One only has to look as far as the results here in Aurora back in 2014 when the majority of voters opted to knock the composition of Council down from the current roster of eight members, to a wieldier six.

In fact, over 8,000 residents who bothered to vote in the referendum question on the ballot that year voted in favour of the reduction.

Council, on the other hand, rejected the idea after extensive discussions around the table months after Aurorans went to the polls to speak their mind.

In the lead up to the vote, Council set a threshold whereby a certain number of votes (a percentage of eligible voters) needed to weigh in before the results could be considered binding. 8,060 votes were cast in favour of a Council reduction whereas 4,427 voters were in favour of the status quo ? well short of the prescribed threshold.

When push came to shove at the Council table only Councillor Pirri voted in favour of the reduction with the rest maintaining the status quo. Among those voting to keep the current system were the three newbie Councillors who cited consultant studies showing municipalities the size of Aurora were best served by a composition of eight Councillors plus Mayor, while others said the referendum vote gave the resulting crop of Councillors no indication on why the electorate voted the way they did.

Nevertheless, that was the way they voted?but it fell on deaf ears.

With change being in the air, I wonder if the results would be any different if that particular referendum was held today. If it is considered for the next ballot in 2018, it has the potential to be a very different ballot indeed.

Council this week is considering following Newmarket's lead in implementing a system which would do away with the traditional paper ballot voting system in favour of an electronic ballot which voters could access and cast anywhere they can go online.

If Council does adopt the new voting method, they won't exactly be re-inventing the wheel.

In addition to Newmarket, the report up for consideration notes that nearly 22 per cent of all Ontario municipalities have adopted similar systems ? and it's also a system that has been advocated for Aurora before.

Aurora's voter turnout has been historically low in recent ballots, rarely cracking 40 per cent of eligible voters and rarely ? if ever ? dipping below 30 per cent, but every time we fail to crack the Top 40, as it were, there are invariably ideas bandied about on how to increase voter engagement and, ultimately, voter turnout.

Engagement has always been a tough nut to crack. Voter turnout only seems to spike if there is a particularly hot button issue up for grabs ? and those are rare in Aurora ? or concerted efforts to send a message to an unpopular incumbent.

Indeed, engagement is always brought to the fore during budget sessions which, aside from a couple of handfuls of genuinely ? and perennially ? engaged regulars.

?Dancing girls,? ventured former mayor Evelyn Buck with a smirk when the 2010 ? 2014 Council was pondering how to get people through the doors of Town Hall to sound off on how they want their hard-earned tax dollars to be spent. It was a suggestion received with a chuckle but, let's be honest, it was about as sound a suggestion as you're going to get ? outside of offering free food, usually barbecues, in an Aurora formula which has previously born fruit.

Past proponents of electronic voting have argued that giving electors the possibility of doing their democratic duty from the comforts of their home, at the office, or during the morning or evening commute would go a long way towards getting those voter numbers past the 40-line and beyond. The report before Council, however, throws cold water on that theory, stating there is no data to back that up.

This week will be telling.

As is the case of so much that happens in this Town, when it comes to changing the status quo on policies, places, and procedures that have become something of a way of life, they are subject to report upon report and question upon question until they are dissected beyond recognition or die a natural death in a dark drawer in a director's office.

In short, elected officials can sometimes be gun shy in making decisions that change the way we do things, decisions that could result in an impact, until momentum, engagement, and the chance to actually make a difference evaporates ? such as reducing the size of Council.

The stats might not be there to say electronic voting actually results in a higher voter turnout but, as we all know, Aurora is quite often an anomaly when it comes to the fickle fingers of voters.

Expanding access to the vote is never a bad thing. There might be some generational issues in getting some people to turn on, but there is nothing gained when nothing's ventured.