

Democracy's pitfalls

We had the opportunity for an interview with Allan Thompson, Mayor of Caledon, last week. Our conversation was centred mainly on the Ontario Government's relatively newly minted 'Places to Grow'. This is the structure the Province has written up for planning about the growth of Ontario's exponential influx of population now and coming for the next many years. As a document, as a plan, it has many failings, major among which is the lack of true collaboration.

Subsequent reflection left us with other thoughts and questions about the issue of government at all.

It is a rum thing ? a democratically elected government. Millions of people have died, are dying, as they thought and believed, to protect the notion of democracy. Yet, when it comes time to exercise this hard-won privilege, only about half of any given population, especially here, takes advantage of this extraordinary freedom.

The other problematic side of the system is those very people who are democratically elected; those upon whose brows we lay the crowns of trust, responsibility and faithfulness. What a joke that sometimes is.

While running for office, they inevitably rush around, back and forth across the territory they hope to rule, promising, promising, kissing babies, shaking hands and smiling! by god, smiling to make their faces break. One wonders if their staff really do keep lists of promises and assurances they are making for handy reference later.

First come the problems of money and the unknowns: both abound. So, when a person is elected, he/she is likely in for some surprises that need more time than there is to fully understand. The bureaucrats, who already know the score, must surely suffer the same old reactions of the newly instated and must work to guide the newbie into the labyrinth of political governing.

The next difficulty is the problem of power. Rarely is an elected person coming from a background of the same sort of power that high office in government possesses. The top of the official pyramid is lofty even in a relatively small state.

To use the analogy: however small the pond, the biggest fish is still boss.

Hence, when bad decisions are made and, in spite of good advice to the contrary by people who know what they are talking about, when the 'boss' insists on sticking to the bad decisions, the electorate pays for it. Debates may rage ? pro and con ? but the proof is in the costs at the end and the effectiveness or not of the project.

Power corrupts the ego. That is really at the nut of it all.

In the extreme, the ego justifies all sins of embezzlement and violence against the state's own people; as a not-exactly-criminal leadership, there is still ego, determined to prove its superiority by mismanagement, favouritism and pursuing or excusing the mistakes of the previous, if kindred, government.

For those who manage to avoid the many pitfalls of leadership, they will have to contend with the frustration of working with the egos and their mistakes. It is no easy task to explain to the bigger fish why they are wrong about their determinations; what those lack in benefit to the voters on whose shoulders every democratically elected soul stands; why understanding the local approach to most issues is effective.

Luckily, living in a democracy, we have the option of accountability, being that we can vote them out in a few years, particularly, if we actually go to the polls.

My daughter Patricia has sent a note through to the Prime Minister's Office, saying that she would like to meet him for a few words. Busy as he is, Justin Trudeau is a great one for popping up just anywhere to meet people at large, take selfies, exchange jokes and, if there's time, a few feel-good stories. Patricia quite rightly reckons he is approachable and may very well agree to spare her some time, too.

She wants to remind him about his election promises ? keeping in mind that she's a fan, voted for him, on his side. Busy, she observes that he needs reminding about the missing Aboriginal women and the myriad of promises made to the First Nations; jog his memory about the sudden flood of votes for him during election day, on the part of the First Nations ? they ran out of ballots and had to photocopy hundreds more to extend the privilege of voting to so many unexpected participants. Standing on their shoulders is a new honour for a Canadian Prime Minister.

There can be no surprise, no abuse of assets or power, no inflation of ego. Mr Trudeau convinced the toughest of us that he will keep his promises.

Patricia just wants to remind him what they are.