

Let elections determine the fate of unruly councillors

Dan McCaffery - April 2024

When I was studying journalism at Lambton College in 1971 my instructor, Geoff Lane, assigned me to cover a city council meeting.

What I found there was something so different from what we see today that it almost seems like it took place in a different lifetime.

The mayor, Paul Blundy, was a competent, gentlemanly chairperson who conducted orderly, businesslike meetings. His councillors didn't always see eye-to-eye but they were, for the most part, civil with one another. They were all decent people. Some were downright brilliant.

Councillors from the early 1970s included such impressive figures as Andy Brandt and Marceil Saddy, who both went on to become mayors. Others from that era who served the city with distinction included Norm Shipley, Dick Ford, John Matheson, Marcella Brown and Dave Boushy, to name a few.

Over the decades that followed there were still a lot of good people on council but proceedings gradually became more and more unruly.

During my time as a city hall reporter with both The Gazette and The Observer I saw a number of councillors storm out of the chambers in a rage. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing because, to a certain degree, you need passionate debate, even some rancour.

But today things seem to be getting totally out of control. Twice in the last six months meetings were adjourned before the agenda was completed because of rowdy behaviour.

Some think the answer is to have the so-called 'integrity commissioner' slap politicians with hefty fines. Others suggest a recall system that would allow an elected official to be removed from office if enough people signed a petition calling for his or her ouster.

Frankly, I don't agree with either approach. As far as I'm concerned the integrity commissioner casts a chill on free speech. And the recall option would overturn verdicts delivered at the ballot box.

There is, however, another way to get rid of a councillor who is causing needless chaos. Simply put, if you don't think a politician is doing a good job, vote him or her out of office at the next municipal election.

That may mean waiting a long time. In this case, the next trip to the polls is about two and a half years away.

Still, it is the most democratic way of doing it.

The fact is that elections have consequences. Voters need to pay more attention to the candidates and the issues.

The late American president, Harry Truman, once said people get the president they deserve. The same could be said of city councils. If you don't bother to vote, or if you cast an uninformed ballot, you're going to get the city council you deserve.