

## **POLITICAL AGNOSTICS**

Gord Hume...December, 2013

Late November. I am in the United States having breakfast with three board members of a very large multi-national corporation. You would know the name.

Within five minutes, the conversation has turned to Rob Ford and the city of Toronto. The New York Times has a front-page story on Mayor Ford. There is disbelief and scorn at the mayor's antics, and at a city that continues to give him a 40% approval rating while Council is stripping him of most of his powers. Apparently the theme becomes a running joke at the board meeting.

It is one thing for a politician and a community to be the butt of jokes by late-night comedians. It is quite another to be mocked at corporate board meetings.

This has been, to quote Her Majesty, an 'annus horribilis' for politicians across Canada. No order of government has been exempt.

From the on-going scandal in the Senate that now keeps hovering around the Prime Minister's Office, to provincial governments being turfed by angry taxpayers, to the Quebec Municipal Corruption Commission and the stunning testimony concerning corrupt practices, to Montreal having four mayors in less than 12 months, to a large Canadian city being put into trusteeship, to mayors and council members in several communities being charged with a variety of offences, to the debacle at Toronto city hall in recent weeks, it has been a shocking and disturbing year for governing in Canada.

I invented a term in my last book: "Political Agnostics". I defined that as people being driven away from interest in government, civic affairs and political issues by the angry politics and politicians of today. A lot of people are simply fed up with the shouting and posturing. They are disgusted by the parochialism that seems have surpassed recognition that there is a common good. Political battles seem to be less civilized and more extreme. "Dysfunctional" is a term being applied to many elected bodies. Many citizens are simply tuning out all of them.

Personal accountability in politics, let alone Ministerial accountability, seems to have been replaced by party rhetoric or blasé dismissal or ignorance of what is right and good for our society. Denial has become common. How issues play out in the media seem to be the primary concern for many elected people, not what is best for the community or the country.

A lot of citizens don't like it. Voting rates decline. Good people, when asked to run for public office, do run—in the opposite direction, as fast as their legs can carry them. Too often the field is left to people without the capacity to really understand the larger issues, or people who are so driven by ideology that civil discourse ceases to exist in political debates.

We have seen in recent years a steady stream of disillusioned elected people leave office--discouraged by the system and frustrated by their inability to making meaningful change. This is happening at all levels of government. It is sad.

This environment of paranoia and incompetence municipally is particularly embarrassing for those of us who are pushing for new roles and greater responsibilities for local governments. I have argued in books, speeches and presentations that for most people and most businesses, most of the time, local government is becoming the most important order of government.

That means we need to look at the 150-year old basis of how our cities are governed and financed. Few people have the courage to extend this discussion. The property tax system is broken and can't be fixed—it was never intended to pay for what municipalities are facing today, from social housing costs to massive infrastructure renewal. We have a federal government without an urban agenda. We have 13 different ways provinces and territories deal with municipalities.

The real shame is that we aren't having a national conversation. The municipal infrastructure deficit gets larger ever day. Cities are in a global hunt for talent, but how do we compete against brand new cities being built in Asia? How are we going to build and reshape our communities to attract and retain talent, jobs and entrepreneurs? Developing a great quality of life for residents. Improving local health issues. Supporting lifelong learning. Encouraging prosperous local economies.

These are some of the issues that we should be addressing. Instead we are distracted by allegations of corruption, moral turpitude, utter incompetence and the media flavour of the day.

It is no wonder that average citizens turn away from politicians. The approval ratings for the US Congress were around 10% in a recent poll. Would Canadian politicians fare much better?

There is genuine anger on many streets about the political process and the women and men who are our political leaders and elected officials. There is serious talk about recall legislation, term limits and toughening local Codes of Conduct. Local rallies are being held against politicians.

Police investigations. RCMP charges. The Senate suspends three members. City councils debate asking a mayor to step aside. Everybody is getting splashed with the brush of filth that is being waved around. The media field-day continues unabated, driving even more disgust and dismay from the voters.

Rare moments of civility in the political arena—I thought many Toronto City Councillors displayed considerable dignity during a week that wasn't very dignified—are overwhelmed by negativity, mean-spirited comments and a disruption of the people's business. If you think these issues aren't a distraction, I suggest respectfully that they are.

Canadians deserve better than what the political process has delivered to them in 2013.