

A new tool



By Nate Smelle

While listening to the March 3 meeting of Hastings Highlands council on YouTube over the weekend, my mind returned to the focus of the column filling this editorial space last week - the advantages and disadvantages of online politics.

With federal, provincial, and municipal elections looming on the not so distant horizon, anyone paying attention to the news can see the expected posturing of incumbent politicians and aspiring leaders on their way to the starting gate. As usual we are already seeing advertisements from each of the political parties attacking each other on television and online. These ads provide us, the electorate, with opinions on why each of the parties and their leaders will be our "best" choice when we head to the polls. To add a degree of "authenticity" to these commercials, each party will cherry pick facts and stats - in some cases twisting them out of shape and beyond recognition - using them to prop up their candidate(s) and sell their ideology to the masses.

In no way are these observations of political tendencies meant to inspire cynicism or dissuade people from participating in the democratic process. In fact, my intent in sharing them is to encourage a higher level of political engagement.

Covering politics and following campaign trails, one begins to notice patterns in the political realm, which for most voters remain invisible. For the politically disinterested but opinionated crowd - the majority of voters - repeating the same drill time and time again seems to provoke an exhaustion that is most easily overcome through voting by colour. Unlike with federal and provincial elections, when it comes to municipal politics, voting by colour is not a really an option. Yes, in smaller communities such as those found in North Hastings where everybody kind of knows everyone else, voters have an idea regarding candidates' political leanings from the signs on their lawns during federal and provincial elections. While this might be enough information for the laziest handful of voters to make a decision at the ballot box, most voters participating in a small town election have some type of personal connection with the people vying to represent them to factor into their decision making process.

Still, despite the advantages this elevated awareness provides us, as we observed in many local municipalities last time around, voter turnout was so low that many candidates walked across the finish line without a single contender behind them.

Reading through the correspondence items listed in the agenda package provided to residents of Hastings Highlands on the municipality's website, it became clear to me that there is a growing disapproval of council's inaction regarding the lack of regulations governing the keeping of exotic animals. It was upon this realization that it occurred to me how the pandemic we are fighting has gifted us with a tool to add to our democratic toolbox before the next municipal election in 2022. This tool, available to every voter with the opportunity to search online, is the archive of recorded meetings now being preserved online.

Reporting on municipal politics in North Hastings for nearly a decade now, I remember the long list of excuses dished out whenever the issue of recording meetings to improve transparency and foster accountability came up. Most often it was the cost of producing, streaming, and archiving these recordings used as a reason for not expanding the public's access to municipal affairs. Now that COVID-19 has forced councils to increase accessibility, we find ourselves with the potential to cast the most informed vote in our history.

Listening to meetings online since the pandemic closed council chambers province-wide, I have found that the quality of discussions among council, and the level of public participation (question period) has diminished. However, in observing councils take advantage of this reduced opportunity for engagement, we also become aware of which issues they consciously choose to avoid. Another enlightening advantage in having access to these archives is the opportunity they give us to see which incumbents are actually working to serve our best interests. By paying attention to which representatives are acting and voting in line with their previous campaign promises, we have the potential to become better equipped in our attempt to elect a team of honest politicians with good intentions.

While the 2022 election might not be our main focus at the moment, if we take the time to master and employ our new tool, we might have less reasons to complain about our elected representatives in 2026.