

# The everyday straws that can break a camel's back

Canadians have a reputation for being “nice” but boring. We are happy as long as we have “peace, order and good government”.

Well, apparently not.

There was a revolution in Guelph in November and it had nothing to do with peace, order or how the city was managed.

This story is about one city, but it could happen in any community where there is a philosophical divide about how much government is good.

The local government in Guelph, it seems, just got too “smart” for its traditionally conservative populace. The city was moving too quickly in some areas and not quickly enough in others. People were not ready to acknowledge their role in waste reduction, water conservation and sound planning if it meant they had to spend more time separating their garbage, could not water their lawns or had to wait for a Wal-Mart store in the city. People were not ready to see their taxes increase to finance public investments in an expansion of the city hall or a new library, when they were still upset about the cost of the city's performing arts centre and downtown arena.

None of these issues is exclusive to Guelph. Indeed, given the reputation the city and its mayor enjoyed as being “green” and forward-looking, this may come as a bit of a shock.

In 2002/2003, hundreds of residents participated in the city's SmartGuelph community planning initiative, and green and forward-looking policies were heartily endorsed by those attending.

While the numbers certainly suggested active engagement by the citizenry, they would only represent about one per cent of the city's population---as those politicians opposed to the subsequent recommendations reminded everyone on many occasions. In fact, the initiative came close to dying on one occasion and all council votes were very close.

The reality of any community is that progress or lack of it is often dictated by a relatively small number of people. Most take no part at all in the running or development of their city. A majority don't even bother to vote every three years. This is a depressing fact of life, or a tribute to our democracy, depending on how you look at it.

Even if a city has a public consultation policy that makes every effort to include those who will be affected by council decisions, the reality of the numbers means that some will always invoke the views of the “silent majority” and claim to speak for them. They may be right, but as long as the majority is silent, how can we know?

This is the case everywhere, whatever the political philosophy of the councillors, but it means decisions based on public input are always suspect in the eyes of those who oppose them.

The silence of the majority extends to election day in many cases, but there are still those who at least make the effort to play their part every three years. And these people, ironically, can set the political tone for the next three years, if they can be organized. If you can get their attention for a few weeks, you can win the day, however peaceful, orderly and well-governed the community may be.

Money talks and talking money is a sure way to get people's attention. There is an inherent suspicion in people's minds about how politicians spent our money (much enhanced by the

Liberals in recent months!). Plant a few seeds about fiscal irresponsibility and the need for change and they will likely grow--particularly if the soil is conditioned.

In the spring of 2003, the city made changes to its waste program that would lower costs but meant extra effort by householders. For weeks there were letters to the editor about the new system, some complaining bitterly, others in support. The simmering resentment was only made worse when a lack of rain meant lawn-watering restrictions. A public debate about the use of pesticides had already fanned the flames of discontent, even though all talk of a bylaw was abandoned in favour of public education. Ongoing delays in an OMB hearing about Wal-Mart merely added to the grumbling.

People who don't want to be part of the running of local government often don't want local government being part of *their* lives, either. This was at the centre of the arguments of most who opposed such measures, a person's right to water his lawn, spray chemicals or shop where he chooses being the real issue.

In the late summer, ongoing initiatives that were looking at the shortage of space at city hall and the need for a new library reached the point where numbers were placed on the table. They were big numbers. More ammunition for the nay-sayers.

While business cases could be made for both projects, the prospect of multi-million dollar investments by the council was seized upon as evidence of a profligate regime. The irony of course is that planning for the future is what sound financial management is all about. These issues appear on council agendas all the time, and in all parts of the country. They are the stuff of local government. In Guelph's case, perhaps it was the combination of all of them in one term that broke the camel's back.

In the fall, the provincial election saw both the local Liberals and Progressive Conservative party machines in Guelph mobilize their troops and while the right-leaning Liberal candidate was victorious, the incumbent PC was only a couple of thousand votes behind and still polled more than 20,000 votes.

In the previous municipal election in 2000, four right-leaning mayoral candidates had split the vote, allowing a progressive candidate to take the prize with 40 per cent of the vote.

This time it was different. There was only one serious challenger for the mayor's chair. Many of those who were so well organized in the provincial election found common purpose at the local level and "united the right". An aggressive campaign was launched against the incumbent mayor and the progressive councillors (including a bizarre press conference to "make public" a long-term budget document that had been provided to a council candidate on request by staff at city hall). The campaign team supported candidates for both mayor and council. And they were ready. Even before the papers were filed, an office had been rented in the downtown, a website had been posted, signs had been made, and a public relations expert was on board. And all the hot buttons were pressed: garbage, water restrictions, Wal-Mart, city hall expansion, new library. Speaking on a local cable television current affairs show, a local political commentator not known as a fan of right-wing politicians, described the effort as "brilliant".

"They got their vote out; they stuck to their message; they knew what they were trying to do," said Peter Meisenheimer on Rogers' Politically Speaking, recently.

"Nobody ever said that a willingness to push the boundaries wasn't a characteristic of politics." And it had been very successful. Guelph had experienced a coup.

The incumbent mayor, whose campaign was based on the input from the SmartGuelph initiative, held her vote from the previous election, but it was not enough. By the end of the night the city

had a new mayor and four new councillors - all painting themselves as fiscal conservatives. The three incumbent councillors who lead the charge for financial prudence were returned with increased vote counts.

Their first order of business was to put on hold any more talk of expanding the city hall or building a new library. Then a new councillor brought a motion requiring staff to bring in a zero-based budget. It was a noble if naive goal given the number of financial commitments over which the city had no control.

Previous salary negotiations, increased budgets from outside boards and agencies and the need to ship garbage out of the city for disposal meant the city was facing an eight per cent tax increase even if it could hold the line on everything else under its purview.

Despite the focus on the fiscal, however, the new council was not immune to pressure from the public. Budget deliberations that saw a council chambers overflowing with citizens included deputation after deputation trying to avert the closure of a swimming pool and others seeking the introduction of an adult crossing guard program. Despite the \$800,000 price tag, they got their way.

To cover the costs, a major road reconstruction project was delayed and there were cuts to the parks and waste budgets. Suggested cuts to the city's information technology budget were not supported and a call to roll back council salary increases, a frequent target in the election, was not supported either.

It is common political wisdom that you make your expensive decisions early on in your mandate. The previous council had raised taxes nine per cent in its first year, courtesy of an inherited commitment to a Sunday bus service (and by two and one per cent in the subsequent years). The new council was keen to get as far away from that number as possible. By the time the budget was passed, by a vote of 7-6, city taxpayers faced a lower but still sizable tax increase of 6.9 per cent. To get there user fees and transit fares were increased, and more than \$2 million was transferred from the city's reserves, as fiscal conservatism gave way to political pragmatism. With many other municipalities bringing in double-digit tax increases this year, Guelph's numbers don't actually look too bad. The new council now has to work hard to ensure there are not too many other straws added to the load on camel's back.

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