

Can politicians stop being human?

Mark Pavilons



?Ninety percent of the politicians give the other ten per cent a bad reputation.?

Henry A. Kissinger

Society has poked fun of our election officials as long as we've had organized governments.

Unfortunately, politics has often been associated with greed, graft and a self-serving quest for power and financial gain.

These are very human qualities, albeit some of the worst ones.

Politics is the one profession, it seems, where people are expected to stop being people because of their role.

Our system encourages public participation in all aspects, from voting to becoming a community leader. From humble, local roots, politicians can rise from the concession roads and make their way to the halls and plush seats in our nation's capital.

That's the beauty of our democratic system ? it allows for such meteoric rise to power for the common man or woman.

Most of the time, the system works and its built-in checks and balances help curb abuse and inefficiency.

That being said, the public's faith in our system has been strained lately.

In Ottawa, our prime minister suspended three senators for abuse of their spending and expense accounts. In the big picture, we're talking about a few hundred thousand dollars ? a mere drop in the bucket as far as government waste goes.

It's the principle that matters. And trust.

It's the whole ideal of entitlement ? they seem to think they deserve it and can do no wrong.

I'm not sure what goes wrong in an intelligent person's mind to flick this switch to feel it's perfectly fine to rip off the government and Canadian public. Maybe we'll never know.

And Toronto's mayor has taken continual flak for his behaviour outside of the office. He's not guilty of any sort of graft. In fact, he's been the most frugal mayor the city has seen in a long time.

And yet, we simply love to kick a man when he's down. And keep kicking.

Studies estimate that public apologies by public figures in the U.S. have doubled since 1990.

Politicians are, again by nature of their role, easy targets. But in what other profession do we go out of our way to find fault and lay blame? What other position of responsibility comes with such microscopic scrutiny?

I ran for regional councillor in Bolton in 2010. I finished second in a four-person race that involved an open seat.

I figured the length of my residency (more than 40 years) and my work in the local media, made me qualified for the job. I also felt I could do good and would enjoy making the process work for my fellow citizens.

The election campaign was more adversarial than I thought it would ever be.

In Peel's case, regional councillors earn more than \$100,000 annually. This is a very handsome salary for a local community representative. At this pay level, it elevates the position substantially ? it's a high-paid professional post. It's not a volunteer role and

politicians today may be motivated by that pay cheque and associated benefits.

Despite the well publicized remuneration, I did encounter a few voters in the last election who weren't aware of the pay scale. They were shocked when they found out what the salary was.

On the flipside, there were many, many souls who said you couldn't pay them enough to become a councillor.

Yes, as mentioned, there are many challenges and drawbacks to being a public figure.

First, kiss your privacy good-bye.

You'll get calls and emails day and night. You can't go shopping or run a few errands without stopping to chat with constituents.

You will have to attend meetings, workshops, public events, community festivals, protests and dinners on a regular basis. Your family will miss your face, and may forget what you look like.

But I believe those who serve, and are driven by a civic responsibility, truly enjoy their jobs.

It puts a spring in their step. They can't wait to engage the public, or meet with counterparts and espouse the virtues of their home municipality.

They are, or have become, local cheerleaders You may know one or two in King. That's a very good thing.

The public can and does cast judgement on a politician's representation and council's performance. Voters can exercise their right every four years by casting ballots. Between elections, taxpayers can attend council meetings, write letters, voice their concerns and work to get things done.

That's how our system works.

Of course, when things wear out and break down, what's the option?

Some believe there should be a mechanism in the Municipal Act to impeach or toss an elected official for various breaches. As it stands in most municipalities, an elected mayor or councillor can only be removed from office if she/he is convicted of a crime, and sentenced to jail.

Under the Act, there are provisions for political conduct, but it's limited to conflict of interest.

There's nothing about behaviour or incompetence. The province won't step in unless the council cannot function, and I doubt that can be said of Toronto city hall.

Presumably, voters know who they're voting for, faults and all, and have to live with the results.

And should Ford run again, no one can argue that voters don't know what they're getting.

His recent charity sale of bobble heads was a fine example of turning lemons into lemonade. And it worked.

Here's one politician who stands before Torontonians, warts and all, and is still popular. Very few can criticize his track record in cleaning up city hall. But boy can they hurl the insults and personal attacks.

One can argue that if his behaviour doesn't stand in the way of his job, then leave him alone.

Others contend he's a spokesperson for one of the biggest cities in Canada, and has an image to uphold.

Both are true.

And that's the catch-22 of it all.

When you get to know your local politicians, you find out they're brothers, sisters, husbands, wives, mothers and fathers who work hard to provide for their families. They have interesting hobbies and love to laugh and spend time with others in the community.

They eat, sleep, get dressed like everyone else, and often face a barrage of phone calls, emails and nasty letters on a daily basis.

Such is their chosen path.

If we make them larger than life, their mistakes will be larger than life.

I say, all the power to them. But heaven help them if they really screw up!

?Judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.?

Simon Bolivar