

Les Leyne: The Island way versus the Ford way



There's the Greater Victoria approach to municipal reorganization, where it takes four years to decide whether to ask about starting over.

Then there's Ontario's Nike approach: "Just do it."

article continues below

Our approach flows organically from the "Slow down, this ain't the Mainland" bumper-sticker mentality.

Mull over the idea for a generation or so. Make a tentative stab at entertaining consideration of a potential pre-feasibility study.

When you get to the point of asking voters what to do, ask everybody a different question. Spin wheels for four years. Watch the province gently and respectfully suffocate the idea. Then prepare to ask a different question and start over.

Ontario's Premier Doug Ford has a different method, different in the way that blitzkrieg was different from the Hundred Years War.

He looks ready to slam a massive reorganization into place before it's even dawned on people what's going on.

Here's what he's done in the last six weeks: (I say again — six weeks.)

A month after becoming premier, he announced in late July that he was going to cut the number of Toronto city councillors to 25 from 47. It's an idea that showed up nowhere in his election campaign and wasn't uttered once.

To make it more grabby, he dropped the news just before the municipal elections.

He gave people 48 hours to digest the idea, then introduced a bill to get it done (the Better Local Government Act), in the face of shocked protests from those 47 councillors.

It passed through the legislature in two weeks. But when Toronto took it to court, a judge trashed it in short order.

Ford responded this week by not only promising an appeal, but recalling the legislature for a special session to invoke the notwithstanding clause of the Constitution to get it done.

The notwithstanding clause is the "screw-the-rules-we're-doing-this-my-way" escape hatch available to premiers who don't have time to get bogged down in constitutional rights.

The pros and cons of requiring two entire hockey teams worth of councillors to run a city are for Toronto to figure out.

But for a south Island taxpayer, the contrast between the two approaches is

staggering. In Victoria, we do nothing, as slowly as possible.

In Toronto, Ford is doing everything, all at once, and pulling every fire alarm he can reach at the same time.

Picture Premier John Horgan just getting his office unpacked, then announcing he's going to cut Greater Victoria's 91 mayors and councillors by 50 per cent. Metchosinistas would be fainting in the fields. Oak Bay would have a stroke. There'd be security checkpoints on the Saanich-Victoria border.

Ford has gotten further down the winding, never-ending road of municipal reorganization in six weeks than Greater Victoria has in decades.

The valid complaints are piling up in Queen's Park about the brute-force surprise attack, the small-c contempt of court, the disdain for due process and dozens of other objections.

But from 5,000 kilometres away, from a place that has almost twice as many councillors as Toronto with just 14 per cent of the population, the main takeaway is a feeling of awe.

The mind reels about how much can happen when somebody — no matter how clumsily — wants to make it happen.

Taxpayers will have a chance to take another baby step toward rationalizing local services next month. The region-wide contemplation went nowhere. The new approach focuses on Saanich and Victoria, where voters will be asked if they want to spend \$250,000 in each community to form a citizens' assembly to study amalgamation. (B.C. is being asked to chip in another \$250,000.)

Amalgamation Yes's Shellie Gudgeon is counting that as progress of sorts. At least they're being asked the same question.

She's been ardently backing amalgamation for several years. But even she thinks Ford is going too fast.

She said there is a middle ground "where top-down meets bottom-up." That's the zone in which talk of municipal reorganization can be conducted.

The inch-by-inch progress here stems from lack of leadership, she said. But Ford's charging ahead is too much even for her.

"We need some leadership," Gudgeon laughed. "But not too much."

lleyne@timescolonist.com

© Copyright Times Colonist

You Might Be Interested In