

Let taxpayers settle amalgamation - NDPPer 'dismayed, disappointed' in The Spec's stance on area government

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The Hamilton Spectator

(Jan 6, 2009)

Having been through many a bruising electoral campaign over the years, I've grown accustomed to taking shots, cheap and otherwise. It comes with the territory, and is something every politician comes to expect in the course of a campaign. Sometimes, the best you can hope for is that your opponents will commit to the high road and that voters make their decision based on the facts available to them.

News media, particularly local outlets that have a long and proud history of helping to keep the public well-informed about the issues of the day, play a crucial role in achieving that ideal.

That is why I was personally so dismayed and disappointed to read The Spectator's Dec. 19 editorial, under the headline Prue plays a divisive game, which utterly misrepresented my campaign's position on giving citizens a mechanism to address the forced amalgamations of municipalities by the Harris government.

While I feel it important to refute the many inaccuracies in The Spectator's editorial, it is equally important to speak to the issue of why Ontarians ought to revisit the issue.

For many Ontarians, amalgamation remains an unhealed wound that continues to fester. Amalgamation occurred absent any popular mandate (the Harris Tories hadn't campaigned on a pro-amalgamation platform), and often with the vociferous opposition of residents in the affected communities. That was certainly the case in Dundas, Flamborough and Ancaster and Glanbrook in 2001. It was certainly the case in my own beloved community of East York, where 82 per cent of residents voted against our forced amalgamation with the City of Toronto in 1998.

In most cases, the promised "efficiencies" of amalgamation never arrived. There is a far unkind cut, though. These forced amalgamations badly damaged the public's faith in both the senior level of government and in the level of government closest to them, their own municipal governments. Forcing residents to amalgamate against their clearly expressed will mocks the concept of representative government, makes us all feel as if our own elected representatives either aren't listening, or don't care what we say or think.

That is the prism through which my campaign views forced amalgamation. To suggest, as The Spectator has, that giving affected residents of forcibly amalgamated communities a say on how they shall be governed (and by whom), represents an effort on my part to "introduce and push for the de-amalgamation of Hamilton and other municipalities," as the editorial states in its opening paragraph, isn't just inaccurate. To borrow from The Spectator's own lexicon, it is at best "disingenuous," and at worst "deceitful."

The proposal I have made is to employ the same approach employed in Quebec, where numerous municipalities were amalgamated against their will. Affected communities were permitted by the provincial government to hold referenda on whether to de-amalgamate, provided a specific number of signatures could be obtained on petition for a referendum. The petition and referendum thresholds are quite high, and while many communities chose not to de-amalgamate, some did.

The sun continues to rise and set in those communities, and regardless of the outcome, all affected residents were finally able to obtain a sense of closure and a say on exactly how they should be governed, and by whom.

My proposal neither advocates de-amalgamation where it is not wanted, nor promotes a pro or anti-amalgamation point of view. Rather, it represents a principled, practical way forward to put the decision-making power with respect to amalgamation or de-amalgamation where it belongs--in the hands of citizens who will have to live in those communities that have been amalgamated.

I could perhaps go on about how The Spectator does a disservice to its own readers by implying that those who still oppose forcible amalgamation are a "niche constituency of disgruntled people," and the out-and-out chutzpah of suggesting that I border on "deceitful" because I will "not be premier any time soon -- if ever." But others are better equipped to speak to those things.

It is up to The Spectator's readers to decide whether or not they appreciate being denigrated in such a fashion. As for whether or when I will be premier, that's not for me or The Spectator to decide. Responsibility for that decision resides with voters across Ontario, not with me, and certainly not with The Hamilton Spectator.

Michael Prue (MPP-Beaches-East York) is the Ontario NDP's municipal affairs critic and a candidate for the leadership of the party. Prior to his election in 2001, he served as a Toronto city councillor, and was mayor of East York from 1993 until 1997, when the community was amalgamated into the City of Toronto.