



Fantino cops out

November 24, 2010

There's an old joke about a farmer who asked his neighbour if he could borrow some rope. "I'd like to help you, my friend," replied the neighbour, "but I need my rope to tie up my milk." "But rope can't tie up milk," said the perplexed farmer. "I know," replied the neighbour, "but when a man doesn't want to do something, one reason is as good as another."

Conservative candidate Julian Fantino seems to have remembered that old joke when handling The Vaughan Citizen's invitations to participate in a candidates debate for the Nov. 29 federal byelection.

First, he asked for the debate to be rescheduled, claiming an unbreakable commitment to attend a charity fundraiser on the evening that all the other invited candidates were available.

Then, when we did reschedule it to Tuesday of this week, he never replied to our renewed invitation.

Instead, he told a Citizen reporter at mid-day Tuesday that he wouldn't be coming because he wanted to attend "a memorial mass not only for my in-laws, but an anniversary involved here at a seniors residence where my wife and I and my family volunteer. It's a memorial mass in a seniors home."

This turned out, The Citizen learned, to be a memorial Mass at Villa Colombo for all the residents who died there in the past year, including Mr. Fantino's father-in-law, who passed away about a year ago, and not even a special Mass that Mr. Fantino's family had itself arranged for a deceased relative.

Vaughan's voters will have to decide for themselves whether or not this "one reason is as good as another" gambit by Mr. Fantino is as amusing in the context of participation in the democratic process as it is in a hoary old joke.

To us, it seems that public debates have become an important part of the election process at all levels of government because they provide an opportunity for voters to see the candidates answer tough questions, confront each other face-to-face and generally show which of them is most worthy of being trusted with the electorate's confidence as its chosen representative.

Mr. Fantino, regrettably, doesn't see it that way. In telling our reporter that he was opting for the memorial service over the debate, he said: "This happens to be a priority for my family and that's what I'm going to be doing. The critics can have a field day. I'm not into the negative stuff. My conscience dictates what is right and wrong and this is the right thing for me to do tonight with my family."

Praiseworthy as it generally is to follow one's conscience and prefer right over wrong, some voters may understandably wonder whether in this case what Mr. Fantino is really saying is that his personal preferences trump the rules of fair play and the needs of the democratic process.

He can't be faulted for wanting to spend more time with his family, after a long and no doubt demanding career in policing. But perhaps the best way to achieve that would have been not to run for an elected office that would require him to spend much of his time away from home, in Ottawa.

Interestingly, Liberal candidate Tony Genco pointed out at Tuesday's debate that he, too, had a family commitment for that evening — tickets to attend a Justin Bieber concert with his daughter for her thirteenth birthday, no less — but he decided, with his daughter's agreement, that this week participating in the democratic process had to take priority.

Mr. Fantino's contrary decision is particularly unfortunate because, while his prior career activities have made him the best-known candidate, they have also made him by far the most controversial.

They raise questions that voters should have been entitled to have a chance to put to him at Tuesday's debate before deciding how to vote.

For instance, it appears indisputable that during the aboriginal occupation in Caledonia, Mr. Fantino as OPP commissioner ordered his officers to stand idly by without enforcing the law while the occupiers committed serious criminal acts.

At the same time, he had his officers intimidate and even arrest law-abiding local residents who tried to assert their rights.

Whether Mr. Fantino was acting on his own initiative or following directions from the provincial government, couldn't this be seen either way as a breach of the oath he swore under the Police Act to "prevent offences and discharge my other duties â?¦ faithfully, impartially and according to law"? If so, wouldn't that make him unsuitable for elected office, let alone to be a potential minister?

As OPP commissioner, Mr. Fantino also became involved in a weird court battle over his attempts to discipline two senior officers on the force who had displeased him in some way. Amid allegations that Mr. Fantino himself had abused his power and acted unlawfully, he tried to have the adjudicator removed for alleged bias for questioning his credibility when he testified at the disciplinary hearing.

After some \$500,000 of the public's money was spent on the matter, the Ontario Court of Appeal ultimately ruled that there was no sign of bias on the part of the adjudicator - and the OPP dropped the disciplinary charges against the two officers on the day that Mr. Fantino was finally to be cross-examined at the hearing.

Doesn't all this seem very similar to the kind of embarrassingly quarrelsome, thin-skinned and litigious behaviour of which voters decided to try to rid Vaughan in the recent municipal elections?

People at the debate might also have wanted to ask about Mr. Fantino's last contribution to public policy in Vaughan - a hyperventilatingly alarmist report on crime in our community that included a bizarre call for designating, as "drug-free zones", any area within a 300-metre radius of schools, parks and other city-owned facilities.

Does Mr. Fantino, as our would-be MP, now recognize that public policy recommendations have to be much better researched, more thoughtfully considered and more carefully balanced between fear-mongering and a solid grasp of reality?

More generally, just what knowledge and attitudes, beyond his experience in policing, would Mr. Fantino bring to the task of representing us in Parliament? What are his views on various social policy, environmental, economic and international issues?

Perhaps Mr. Fantino has excellent answers to such tough but important questions. But there's no way of knowing, because he chose to shun the only opportunity to address them in an open public debate where they could be forthrightly raised and debated.

Certainly, the Rogers TV event on Tuesday that his campaign makes much of his having attended wasn't such a debate. It wasn't open to the public, it was chaired by former Progressive Conservative provincial minister David Tsubouchi without any independent panel of questioners, and the questions were pretty general and soft.

So now Vaughan's voters will have to decide for themselves, without help from Mr. Fantino, what his actions and attitudes, past and present, say about him and how he compares with the other candidates in suitability to be our next MP.

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