

# Getting Re-Elected: A Measure of Success?

By Eli Mina

Sometime ago I sat in as an observer at an orientation session for a newly elected municipal council. The guest speaker was a former mayor and an experienced politician. He provided useful advice, but there was something he did that annoyed me: Every few sentences he would insert phrases like: “and this will help you get re-elected” or “this is one thing you definitely cannot afford to do, even if you know it’s needed, because it will surely undermine your ability to get re-elected” and, to cap it all: “every decision you make over the next three years must be guided by one key question: will it get you re-elected?”

**A**pparently I wasn’t the only one who was annoyed. I was delighted to hear the newly elected mayor finally interrupt the speaker and make this refreshing statement: “Sir, I can assure you that getting re-elected is the last thing on my mind and I believe on the minds of my colleagues. With all due respect, we ran for office to help make a difference for the community of

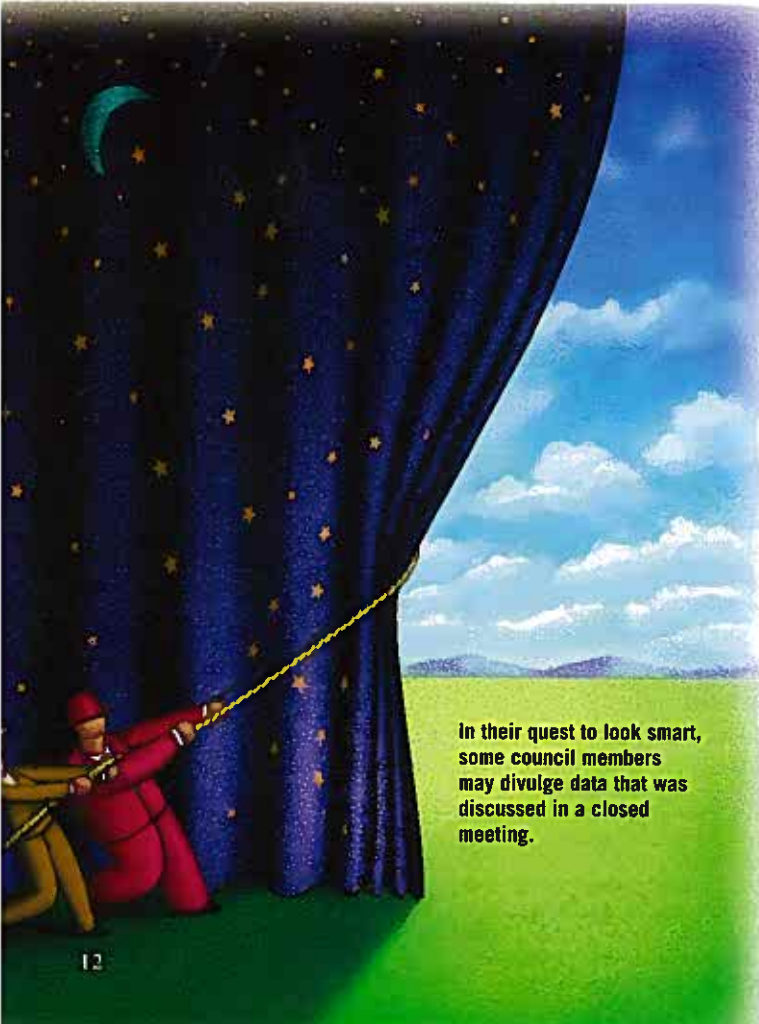
today and the community of tomorrow. We have a lot of work ahead of us, and we cannot afford to be distracted by the fear of not get re-elected. This whole thing is not about us as individuals, but about what we do collectively to advance the interests of our community.” I had to resist the temptation to shout: “Hurrah !!”

Indeed, many political leaders view re-election as the ultimate measure of their success. Some effectively campaign for re-election for the full duration of their terms of office:

- X** they may grandstand in front of the public or the television cameras;
- X** they may compete to be recorded in the minutes as movers and seconders of motions as often as possible (to gain public prominence);
- X** they may become especially vociferous in the six months leading to the next election (often referred to as “the silly season”);
- X** and they may ask leading questions of members of the public or the professional staff, in order to advance their own stature and political agendas.

But it gets worse. In their quest to look really smart, some council members:

- X** may divulge data that was discussed in a closed meeting and may thereby demolish the trust of their colleagues;
- X** may publicly campaign against the implementation of a validly made decision, even though their views were fully heard and considered during the debate;



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- X** may collude and make deals with others on how they will vote, in order to advance narrow causes (important for their own re-election prospects);
- X** may, as a matter of strategy, push to make all the tough decisions at the start of their term, while introducing an abundance of motions to postpone or refer in the last months of the term, especially for decisions that may be politically unpopular.

prophecy. As Richard Bach said in his book *Illusions*: “Argue in favor of your limitations, and, sure enough, they are yours.” Argue that political mediocrity is inevitable, and you’ll make this mindset a reality. Argue that your community deserves better, and you will find ways to change the landscape and thereby boost public trust and respect for your governing body.

So, yes, getting re-elected may indeed show that your community approves of your leadership and wants more of

## Pre-occupation with re-election is a significant dysfunction.

But that’s not the end of it. Things are exacerbated when people outside the elected council adjust their behaviors in order to fit within the re-election mindset or take advantage of it. Some staff members may withhold significant but contentious information and may even sanitize their reports, for fear that they may offend or anger their *anxious to get re-elected* political masters. Some citizens with narrow causes may try to extort promises from elected politicians in exchange for their past support or promised support to get them re-elected. Other citizens may threaten to undermine a council member’s re-election prospects unless the individual votes the way they want them to.

Simply put, the pre-occupation with re-election is a significant dysfunction. It places pressures and constraints on a governing body’s decision-making process and erodes its ability to make informed, balanced and principled decisions that are based on objective and thoughtful analysis of the issues at hand. This pre-occupation can become a substantial distraction that causes elected officials to think first and foremost of themselves and their political prospects, while the short and long term interests of their community take a back seat.

When people dare to question this pre-occupation with re-election, the response by others often is: “Just what are you? Naive, or just plain stupid? Welcome to the world of politics!” Such cynicism and apathy are bound to further entrench the dysfunction and make it a self-fulfilling

the same. Conversely, it may mean that you won by default, because your competitors were too weak. Either way, re-election by itself should not be your primary measure of success as an elected official. The primary measure of success should be your ability to look back at your term of office and

be genuinely proud of your track record and the decisions you made in partnership with your colleagues on the governing body; the fact that these decisions were made in a thoughtful, mature, transparent and trustworthy manner; the fact that you always parked your ego at the door and were able to work together with your colleagues for something larger than any of the personalities around the table – the greater good; the fact that you made the right and necessary decisions despite their controversial nature and despite taking abuse from vociferous opponents who threatened to mobilize the voters against you.

These factors – not re-election – will be the true measure of your stature and success as an elected official. ■



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