

17 September 2010

TAKING THE POLL POSITION

We politicians occasionally need to look inside your head. Physicians can use a probe; politicians can use a poll. Actually, “poll” is an obsolete word for head (as in the poll tax or the common redpoll).

Polling is one way of poking around to see what you think about an issue. There are at least four ways to examine collective heads: petitions, public meetings, polling, or referendums - in increasing order of cost and (sometimes) participation.

Petitions can indicate a problem; but they are by nature one-sided. They catch signers unawares and oft-times uninformed. Petitions do have the advantage of being written and circulated by residents and therefore not ‘tainted’ by being a City initiative.

Public meetings can be very productive if not emotionally charged, but they generally are not a big draw.

Polling suffers from the appearance of bias; but in Westmount, the nine independent members of Council would not stand for a lot of spin. If respondents are already informed, telephone polling can be an efficient way to gauge public opinion.

For me, the best is polling with an information package. In April, our eight-page mailing describing the proposed arena/pool project returned 2,218 responses, representing 28% of Westmount households. A stunning 83% of respondents approved the project.

Ipsos Descarie, who received and tabulated the responses, calculated that, given such a high participation rate, *had every single Westmount household responded*, we would still have got an approval rating somewhere between 81 to 85%.

But at least one detractor does not believe

in scientific extrapolation. He wants a 60% participation rate (both for and against) in order to achieve *his* definition of majority approval: that the number of “for” votes equal 50% of the total population. With such an impracticable hurdle, only four Montreal Island cities would have demerged and Newfoundland would not have joined Canada.

But first prize in the “how wrong can you get it?” category just has to go to *The Gazette’s* August 17 headline about the project: “Westmount plan gets cold shoulder.” This appeared during the surprisingly wide mainstream media coverage of those Westmounters who wanted the funding for the arena/pool project to be approved by a City-wide referendum. In the event, only 114 signed the register; 500 were needed to force a referendum.

But isn’t a referendum the gold standard of public consultation? The ultimate democratic desideratum? The guarantee of the highest participation rate? Not necessarily. It’s hard to imagine a referendum to approve a municipal loan would draw even the 30% turnout we got in the 2009 election - and about the same as our April mailing.

After all, we only managed to get a 58% turnout for the 2004 referendum to re-create the entire City of Westmount - and we had volunteers by the hundreds, radio ads, and a full-time coordinator I hired for six months.

Referendums, while appropriate for demerging from Montreal (or joining Canada), are expensive, divisive, time-consuming, blunt instruments for approving City projects.

Myself...I’m a poll man. (*Cue guitar riff.*)