

New code of silence

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While members of city council claim they are attempting to tighten confidentiality rules, it looks more like an attempt to bully those with unconventional or independent opinions.

Council voted Monday to add to its code of conduct that councillors "will respect confidential information" and, if a breach is found, it could lead to a councillors' pay being suspended.

This looks to us like it is aimed squarely at Coun. James Calnan and councillors speaking to The Expositor admitted as much.

Calnan broke with council solidarity on native land claim protests and changed his mind on the decision by council to pursue legal action against Six Nations protesters who stalled progress on several construction sites. He has since retracted his position somewhat.

We understand the necessity for some information that crosses the desks of municipal councillors and employees to remain confidential, but this move looks more like a muzzle for councillors who express independent opinions.

Council solidarity is great, but if an elected official undergoes a change of heart, he or she should have the right to express it. That's why we have elections -- to let voters decide if an elected official's salary should be cut off.

Some may see Calnan's behaviour on the native protests issue as wrong or even a little loopy, but as far as the city's legal action goes, he's pretty well right -- it has achieved little impact thus far. Just last week, Six Nations protesters stopped city workers at a site in Eagle Place.

Right or wrong, however, councillors' voices should be heard and members of the public should be concerned over any attempt to silence an unpopular opinion.

We understand and respect that council decided that the mayor would be the sole spokesman on native protest issues -- evidently so we could hear him repeatedly say he's "disappointed." But we also respect a maverick like Calnan's right to speak his conscience.

"It's unfortunate that he did not honour our rules about in-camera discussions," said Coun. Greg Martin, "and one of them was that the mayor is the sole spokesman on the native land claims dispute."

That sounds like handing Stephen Harper-like control to a mayor who was not elected to the position of spokesman on native protests.

Not to split hairs, but Martin's quote discusses what took place in camera, too. And last week, Coun. John Bradford spoke to The Expositor about the protest in his ward, calling non-native supporters of the protest "naive."

So does a breach occur only when an unpopular opinion is expressed? Will every complaint prompt an investigation or just the ones about those outside the inner circle? Who decides who gets investigated?

The open-ended nature of the sentence council added to the code of conduct -- that covers "confidential information" received "through other means" -- is chillingly vague and could mean almost anything.

Any move that means people will have less insight into what government is doing is contrary to the open government people want.

If this crackdown on confidentiality means councillors feel prohibited from talking to the press, then people will have less information about their municipal government.

Surely that's bad for all of city council.

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