

Democracy in all its messy glory

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A flock of journalism students from Centennial College visited Toronto city council on Tuesday, and their instructor gave them strict instructions: to stay at the meeting until council made a decision -- any decision-- and then file a story.

Poor students. On Tuesday the 44 members of council debated a billboard bylaw until 5 p.m., then suspended the debate because they had previously agreed to start discussing gender access to hockey rinks. Council recessed that debate at 8 p.m. without voting on anything at all. Coming back yesterday would not have helped, either: Council began the day with a new special meeting on election financing, which lasted all day. The billboard and ice debates remained in the air, like planes circling Pearson in a holding pattern.

This place has been called "silly hall" and an "asylum," and it is easy to see why a visitor would draw that conclusion. Often, council seems all suds and no ale. But in fact, I challenge readers to point to a more healthy democracy than Toronto City Hall.

Our former City Hall bureau chief, Allison Hanes, summing up her tenure the other day on the Posted Toronto podcast (before moving to The Gazette in Montreal), celebrated her 18 months at City Hall for the openness of the government: Almost every decision begins life as a report, then goes through a committee meeting (where every member of the public gets five minutes to speak) and then goes to city council, for more debate. Messy? Yes. But compare the column inches or air time that City Hall gets, vs. Queen's Park, and you can tell which government catches the public's imagination.

(The heat is too intense for some: Deputy Mayor Joe Pantalone, himself planning a run for mayor, yesterday suggested council regulate the press to eliminate bias during our coverage of election campaigns.)

Some have suggested party politics would streamline city council decision making. Sure, but who wants to streamline the process? The current, every-councillor-for-himself (or herself) system raged in all its glory yesterday in a day-long debate on banning corporate and union donations, in a chamber decorated with large red and white poinsettias.

Councillors Norm Kelly (Scarborough-Agincourt), Howard Moscoe (Eglinton-Lawrence) and Giorgio Mammoliti (York West) who sit on the Mayor's executive committee, oppose the ban, whereas councillors Frances Nunziata (York South-Weston) and Michael Walker (St. Paul's), normally thorns in the Mayor's side, support the ban, with Mr. Walker saying, "All the progress on this issue has been done under this Mayor, David Miller." (Council passed the policy at 5 p.m., 24-12.)

Bigger problems here arise when council abandons the process. Case in point: the debate on girls hockey in cityowned arenas. The Mayor brought a motion straight to the floor of council, for municipal bureaucrats to oversee eight independent, cityowned rinks. The result was a messy debate, with hockey players (both boys and girls) seething, mutely, in council's black leatherette benches.

Yesterday, councillor Karen Stintz (Eglinton-Lawrence) suggested that, through the committee process, council could have found common ground among adversaries in the hockey access debate.

"It's fundamental to our tradition that we hear from all sides, and we didn't do that this time," she said.

Open, nonpartisan debate at council can even allow allegiances to evolve. In Mr. Miller's first term, his deskmate, Mr. Mammoliti, repeatedly attacked Mr. Miller, but by the second term Mr. Miller put him on the executive. Yesterday as Mr. Mammoliti spoke, Councillor Paula Fletcher (Toronto-Danforth) heckled him.

"Just leave me alone, Councillor Fletcher," Mr. Mammoliti yelled, at which point the Mayor put his arm around Mr. Mammoliti and rubbed the councillor's belly in a soothing way. Isn't democracy grand?

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