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Cleaning up City Hall

Never mind scandal, the lack of respect at council is what's eating away at its integrity, says *Michael Walker*

It is a hard and painful fact of civic life that a good deal of water cooler talk these days is about wrongdoing at City Hall.

First, a badly mismanaged, multi-million dollar computer contract involved alleged influence peddling and bribes, as well as public servants with decidedly private agendas. Later, allegations of the private appropriation of public assets resulted in employee firings. Most recently, alleged favouritism, nepotism and cronyism in public-service hiring has produced a new round of managerial firings.

For those of us who have been around Toronto City Hall for a few decades, it is terribly disarming stuff. With the exception of the odd human foible, we have long been — by design or good fortune — a government that seemed to routinely rise about all this; a series of administrations that have proudly worn a mantle of integrity and propriety.

In her report on the Toronto computer leasing inquiry, Madam Justice Denise Bellamy plainly detailed the decline in probity, as well as a set of 241 recommendations to help overcome it. In addition, the city has created the positions of integrity commissioner and auditor general to provide some necessary counsel and oversight.

Valuing diverse opinion: I used to enjoy council debate. The passionate expression of a view opposite to my own was music to my ears. It not only meant that the public policy game was in play, it reaffirmed a common understanding that we were all participating in a collective aspiration bigger than ourselves; an opportunity to listen, learn and even reconsider in pursuit of the larger public good.

No more. Varied opinion is not actively sought at city council, only accommodated. We don't thank councillors for their contrary views: We ignore, dismiss or goad them. Councillors with a predisposition routinely exit the chamber rather than listen to the other side. Personal invective and slander occur far too frequently. In a city that prides itself on the value and promotion of diversity, it is plain that this is not a part of our own governing mentality.

Accommodating minority opinion: Even in the absence of formal party politics, there is a ruling class at City Hall. With its agenda in tow, it is common culture for the ruling bloc to put most of its energy into fending off all comers, and especially those councillors with new or different ideas. When the votes are lined up, the rest is just process. The result is a kind of majority rule that marginalizes the contributions of those outside it, and, by extension, all those constituents whom they represent.

A healthy democracy should be a bit messy. It should seek out alternate viewpoints in the interest of breadth of intellect and intent. The tension of opposites produces an energy of accommodation. It is the fertile ground from which teamwork and innovation grow and it results in better decisions and more representative government.

Practising consensus: Consensus building had earned an important place in the modern era of municipal government and decision-making in Toronto. In its practice, extremes are negotiated to a centrist position that maximizes accommodation. It is a fine art and requires hard work. Today, it is a lost art, supplanted by a drive for a predetermined agenda that segregates and isolates.

Respecting staff: It takes generations to build and maintain a public service that thrives on independence and offers professional opinion untainted by political imperative or the ideology of the moment. That arm's-length independence is the foundation for sound debate and informed political judgment; it also ensures a measure of continuity from one administration to the next.

For some time now, there has been a weakening in the arm's-length relationship between politicians and staff. Private political direction to staff inhibits professionalism. It stymies alternative thinking and has resulted in a culture of implied retribution. Morale declines. Confidentiality supplants openness.

In her concise recommendation Number 71, Bellamy writes: "For the mayor, integrity in government should be a top priority."

It seems to me that the workings of our own council — and the attitudes that underlie them — would be a good place to start.

Michael Walker is the city councillor for St. Paul's ward, Toronto.

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