

Open Letter Issued by the Bureau of Municipal Research, 137 Wellington Street West, Toronto 1



CIVIC AFFAIRS

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TIME'S A-WASTING (*City Council Meetings*)

Fellow Citizens:

The long and wearisome hours taken up in meetings of the City Council have, for some years, been a source of amazement to observers at the City Hall. At last the strain is bringing protests from Council members themselves--and small wonder. During 1948, better than two-thirds of the regular business sessions, called at 2:30 in the afternoon, ran on until midnight or later. The pre-election meeting on November 15th set something of a record; it did not break up until 5:25 a.m. This year, too, the sessions started off on the same track. The meeting which began the afternoon of January 24th ended next morning at 25 minutes to four. More often than not, these endurance contests provide the newspapers with abundant copy and the reading public with some short-lived humour. But it is worth remembering that they can have unhappy consequences too. The affairs of civic government affecting 700 thousand people are settled at Toronto Council meetings. Many of the most contentious questions are being decided regularly in the small hours of the morning--at the fag end of a long session.

Recently, Council gave consideration to amending the policy on partial exemptions from property taxes for small homes. It was the preliminary but important round--a request for revised enabling legislation from the Province. A thorny issue, it had first been considered by the Legislation Committee; the Board of Control neither approved their proposal nor agreed on a substitute recommendation; then the question came before Council. Council's debate on it took place between 2:00 and 3:00 a.m. By that time the member who had maintained keen interest in earlier proceedings could hardly be expected to give his best thought to the problem. Councillors, after all, are human beings and there are limits to their capacity for physical and mental alertness. Yet the decision was not postponed, but was settled by a majority favouring Provincial legislation, which was in conflict with the view of the Department head, the administrative specialist. Whether he was right or wrong, it is doubtful if, in the circumstances, the question of partial exemptions received adequate and efficient treatment.

At the City Hall it is a rule that Department heads and other senior officials should stand by each fortnight for as long as Council is in session, and admittedly there is good reason for it. These men are needed frequently to advise or to supply information to Council. But under present conditions, how can they do full justice to their jobs the next morning? And, if officials can give valuable assistance at meetings as they operate now, they could match this with much better service under

a proper timetable. Additionally, the current practice amounts to an unfair test of loyalty. It is very unlikely that a large business concern would regularly request its senior executives to be available for consultation with the company's Board of Directors until 2 and 3 o'clock in the morning. Indeed, what sensible Board meets from 2:30 p.m. until 2:30 a.m. or later?

If pressure of work were the sole reason for these marathon sessions, the obvious solution of more frequent meetings would surely have been hit on and adopted before now. But, in fact, the heavy agenda at Council meetings is not by itself the pressure behind the gruelling sessions. The time schedule is too loose and inefficient. About one meeting in three gets under way late, and the adjournments for dinner are always more than ample--normally over two hours. The odd member drifts in and out without sufficient regard for the schedule as it does operate. There is room for tightening up on these points.

When the Council sits in Committee, the Mayor turns over the role of presiding officer to one of the Aldermen; throughout the year, the job is given to each in turn. Naturally, all are not equally skilled in maintaining order and expediting proceedings. There is no thought that this "democratic procedure" should necessarily be abandoned. But it is obvious from observation of Council sessions that the Chairman must have better support from his fellow members if the scheme is to work effectively.

These are, it can be said, notes in the minor key--but not unimportant. The major themes need better playing too, and here the outstanding fault is in the calibre of debate itself.

Members of Council can usually find several items in the reports from the Board of Control to serve as talking points for an hour or two each. However, in going through the reports, which include important recommendations and statements from the Board and the Standing Committees, the Councillors seldom seem to be intent upon examining these with a fine tooth comb. Inadvertant slip-ups can and do occur. For instance, at the February 7th meeting, the Board report contained one motion which required not confirmation but deliberation by the Council. In the haste to reach adjournment, after rambling discussions on other topics, this motion was nearly forgotten. The Council had risen from Committee, and the Mayor was back in the chair, before the protests of a lone member were noticed. Then, belatedly, the matter was dealt with.

A week ago, on C.B.C. 'Capital Report', one commentator said, "It's much easier to discuss something at length before you know what you're discussing." He was referring to a debate in the House of Commons, but the same remark could be applied in large measure to almost every meeting of City Council. Questions asked sometimes reveal an unpardonable lack of familiarity with the details of proposals under review. Many a long harangue shows up the same weakness. Members who are not transgressors themselves put up with time-wasting which they would hardly tolerate in their own businesses. The only defence seems to be to engage in crossfire which delays proceedings even further. The result is that the gallery, who do not see the volume of work done on their behalf by elected representatives between meetings, are given a very poor impression indeed. Certainly the performance is not in keeping with the dignity and responsibility of so important a body.

The observer may at first be puzzled by two other features of Council debates. First, why are there lengthy and repetitious speeches by member after member, even on measures which have already won majority support? And, secondly, why do questions outside the municipal field (albeit worthwhile) take up so much time in a Council which can hardly get through its own essential work? Perhaps one clue is the presence of the reporters at the press table.

If Board of Control reports at times get slipshod treatment by Council, there is some excuse for it. Councillors do not normally receive their copies for study until the Friday evening before the Monday Council meeting. If there is late business to come forward, a supplementary report may reach them Monday morning, and some reports have been known to arrive after members have taken their places in the Chamber. It seems unfair, therefore, to censure the Alderman who fails to brief himself over the weekend on the contents of reports running usually to over one hundred pages of close print. So it is not only the late reports which are read for the first time while the debate is in progress.

There is, however, no unwarranted delay in the schedule under which business moves through the Committee stage, to Board of Control for its review, and is fed out in printed form and delivered by hand to the members. Before the war, better than a day was saved on the printing time and this may become possible again soon. Also, of course, Council members know the substance of reports from Committees on which they serve. But, if all are to be given an opportunity to do more than just talk, each Councillor should be assured of several days to examine and inquire into various features of the full reports and Board recommendations.

To make this possible, the Bureau urges some shift in the meeting days for Committees, for the Board of Control, or both. As the schedule operates now, business which comes before the Committees following one Council meeting is routed through (if it can be handled immediately) and presented at the next. This is neat procedure if it can be made to work. But, rather than have matters bog down or get skimmed over in Council, as they often do, the Standing Committees might better meet the week preceding Council and have their reports carried over for final review the following fortnight. While this would mean an extra week's delay, fewer items might be held up through being referred back for reconsideration to the Board or to the Committees, and in any event there could be a much better screening of city business.

On occasion, we should expect members of Council to give air to their pet theories or to blow off some steam. Few people would want to deny them this privilege. Nor is it at odds with good debate. Yet the consistent failure of the City Fathers to give a good performance in the Council Chamber cannot so easily be excused. When the press begins to label meetings as 'dismal' or 'disgraceful', it is time for a change. Individual members with excellent records are suffering today from a collective reputation which is far from top.

The Bureau has put forward suggestions which might clear the ground for better meetings. But improvement of only the mechanics will not guarantee results. What is needed is a concerted drive by the whole body of Council to raise the tone of its meetings.

For too long Toronto citizens have put up with poor Council meetings, without protest; and, perhaps, by undiscerning support of those Councillors who have played quite deliberately to the gallery, some people have actually furthered the trend towards frothy debate. It is time, surely, for renewed public interest and support for an immediate and much-needed improvement.

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