



OPINION

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Why was all that work needed for Martin Street?

There were no noisy celebrations in the street, bells ringing, nor any reported new romances formed out of this week's victory for democracy as our town council, after being clued in by the electorate, voted to support the preservation of the trees and ambience of Martin Street. It was VM Day. Victory in Milton.

While the results were satisfactory, a question remains. Why was such a major effort required by a group of taxpayers to have their money spent in the manner they wanted?

There are so places areas just at the local level where money is being spent on questionable projects that it's difficult to even be aware of them all.

Is there really support for spending \$1.5 million on a new home for the Halton regional museum in Milton? I asked 25 people that question. Some thought it a good idea but a low priority. Not one of them knew there is currently a regional museum located at the Kelso Conservation Area, or confused it with the Ontario Agricultural Museum.

I also found no support for starting a Peter Pomeroy defence fund. Yet people were more incensed at regional council's ineptitude on the question of the regional chair's legal fees than they were with Mr. Pomeroy himself. Mr. Pomeroy deserves his day in court, but even lawyer Eddie Greenspan would be hard-pressed to mount a defence for our regional council.

Many of our current councillors perceive themselves as members of a board of directors whose role is to look after funding and concept approvals, while leaving the day-to-day operations to town staff. The result has been that

View Point

with PATRICK KELLY



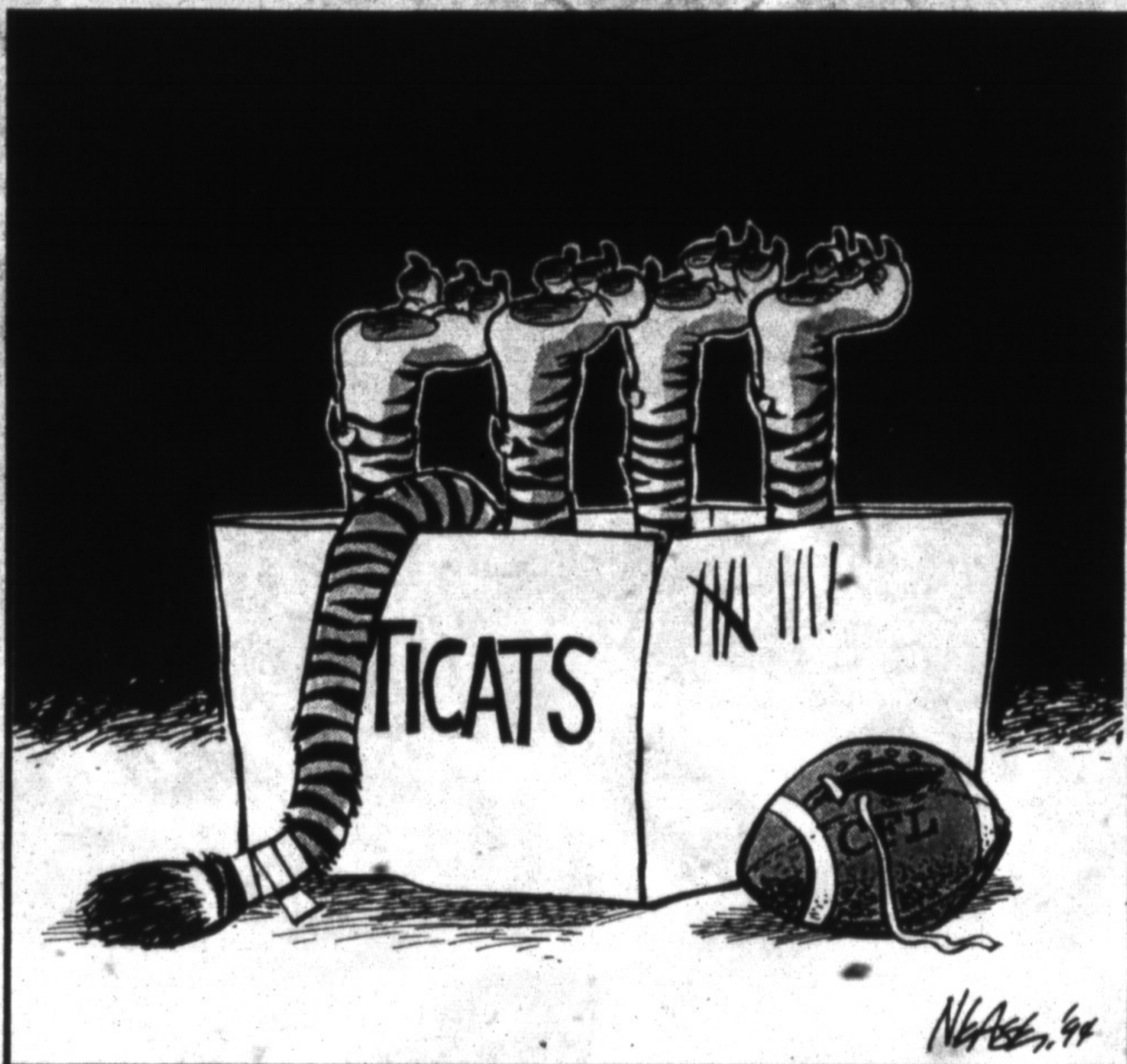
many councillors, like our MPs and MPPs, appear to have lost touch with the people they represent. The country is run by committees and advisory groups controlled by special interest factions.

Are plebiscites or referendums the only way the taxpayer can reclaim his say in political decisions? Some people worry these initiatives are too costly and unmanageable, but many issues could be handled more efficiently and at less expense than is the case now.

On a different note, a couple of people have taken issue with my recent remarks about foreign aid. I still maintain too many projects offer too few tangible benefits to the people who need them most.

Is that the difference between socialism and conservatism? Each has the same goals, but only one has a responsible budget and demands true accountability.

Is it common sense that's lacking in so many decisions made at all levels of government? Is that why it's necessary to mount a campaign similar to the Martin Street petitioners' exercise over every important issue?



Running government like a business

In 1978 a round of property tax revolts swept through many American cities. Taxpayers won the day and governments across the land found themselves bound by various tax limitation measures.

Taxpayers in California, for example, cut property tax rates and then placed limits on future increases. To cities, across the United States, the wave of municipal tax revolts signaled a new era of fiscal responsibility in their day-to-day operations.

The City of Phoenix, a fast-growing centre of 900,000 people at the time, faced enormous demands to keep pace with the area's population growth and the rising need for new streets, facilities and services. Recognizing that the public was in no mood for continually increasing property taxes, the city council, after much debate, moved to bid out a portion of Phoenix's garbage collection services.

After council voted its approval for the plan the mayor took Ron Jensen, Phoenix public works director and the city manager responsible for refuse collection, aside. She asked him whether he was going to compare the city's costs with the bid costs the city would receive from private companies. Mr. Jensen replied his department would put in a bid too.

Mr. Jensen went back to his office and called together his staff. How could his team honour the commitment to the mayor and city council? Over the next weeks Jensen and his staff began

Let's Talk Taxes



with PAUL PAGNUELO

developing the department's proposal for providing collection services to a section of Phoenix.

Like a business, they looked at their costs and projected what resources the city workforce would need to provide the service. When the bid was opened, the city's costs came in higher than the winning bidder and the work was transferred to a private contractor for a five-year period.

Over time, the city lost four garbage collection districts to private contractors in the new competitive bidding process. No city workers lost their jobs because of a "no layoff" policy. As employees retired they were not replaced. Others were transferred to other departments.

How was this new approach different from that of the typical Canadian city? Mr. Jensen and his staff ran the public works department like a business. With the need to compete the city collection team, both managers and employees, sharpened their pencils and identified all their costs. They observed how the commercial contractors provided the service more efficiently.

Over time, the government team reduced its costs dramatically. Using modern accounting techniques they challenged costs from other city departments that inflated the cost of their proposal. They did everything they could to be competitive. This allowed the city team to lower its bid prices.

By 1989, the city workforce had won back all five collection districts.

In a recent interview, Mr. Jensen welcomed the city team's opportunity to bid against the private contractors. "We want them there" he said. "It's good for us. We've learned from them. They've learned from us. We need that competition."

What has running government services like a business meant for Phoenix? The citizens of Phoenix now pay less for garbage pickup than they did 10 years ago. Collection costs per household have dropped 4.5 per cent per year since 1979. The city auditor estimates that since Mr. Jensen began running his department like a competitive enterprise, Phoenix taxpayers have saved at least \$25 million.

An important bonus has been lower than average municipal tax rates. After the slump of the late 1980s, Phoenix's population and economy is growing strongly again. Industries and businesses from highly-taxed California are flocking to the Phoenix area with new investment and jobs.

The importance of a genuine apology

People don't apologize very much or very well. When they do, it's reluctantly — they grit their teeth, they say it perfunctorily, without any remorse, just because they're trapped or they want to end an argument.

It's too bad. An apology is one of the most powerful, attractive and endearing acts in the human repertoire.

In one family counselling session, dad yelled at his teenage son for lying, and it turned out dad was wrong. It was not typical of dad to jump to conclusions or overreact — he was a decent and loving father — but he was wrong in this case and he admitted it. I asked him to apologize.

He paused a long time, steeling himself for this traumatic episode, the veins in his neck bulging and his jaw rigid, and finally said: "Mark, even though you have lied and stolen from us many times, and you know we have usually been very patient and fair with you, I was wrong this time."

This is how most people apologize, with caveats, qualifiers, a little blame thrown at the other person. This is not an apology.

Why is it so hard to apologize? Is it admitting a weakness, a loss of control? The truth is, it takes a strong person to apologize. It takes insight to apologize. It takes commitment to apologize.

A real apology is unqualified. Its purpose is solely to tell another person that you are truly



Psychology in the '90s

with DR. ARNOLD RINCOVER

sorry for what you did. To apologize you have to understand why it is wrong, how it might affect the other person. It holds an implicit promise that you will not do it again.

If it is done sincerely and thoughtfully, an apology is truly magical. It has a cleansing effect. It clears the air. It allows you to be around that person without worrying about what they are thinking. It reduces the guilt. It takes the onus off of you and quickly puts the event behind you.

Any caveat, qualifier, or blame thrown in destroys the apology. In fact, it usually has the exact opposite effect — it makes the person madder, more defensive. Mark started arguing with his dad after the so-called apology — "You've been fair? This is the first time you've ever been wrong? What about the time..."

In front of Mark, I told dad I was still waiting for his apology. He was stunned, thinking he had just unloaded a terrible weight. We talked about it, at length — why he should apologize

and what a real apology looks like. I told him to hold all his "buts", "what abouts" and "Mark shoulds" in abeyance, and just deal with the fact that in this one case he was wrong.

I had to assure him, endlessly, that apologizing did not mean he was a terrible person or a terrible father or that he was to blame for everything that has gone wrong in his relationship with his son. It was a remarkable amount of work to prepare this father for an apology.

Dad was really sweating now, but he did it... and he did it well. Then a fascinating thing happened. Mark apologized, on his own. They both started crying, hugging, and saying all kinds of mushy stuff. It turned into a male-bonding session that would reduce the coldest heart to jello.

This enabled me in later sessions to get them both to try other, effective methods of conflict resolution. Slowly, trust was rebuilt, reins were loosened, the relationship reestablished. All started by a simple apology.

When your son teases his sister and you make him apologize, don't let him get away with a perfunctory, "sorry".

Explain why he needs to apologize. Make him do it over if he doesn't mean it, if he uses a mad voice or an abrupt voice. And don't be afraid to model it — apologizing to children when you're wrong, as we all are at times, shows a strength of character and self-esteem, not weakness.