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Open and transparent

Recently the Ontario Legislature passed Bill 130 which made sweeping changes to the way municipalities operate by giving them new powers and responsibilities. It also gave the citizens of Ontario a power they've never had before – a method to challenge the legality of a closed-door council meeting.

While this is an excellent first step, it does have some major shortcomings. For one it only deals with municipal councils and their committees. No hospital boards, school

boards, boards of

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health, police services boards, library boards, college or university governing bodies, Local Health

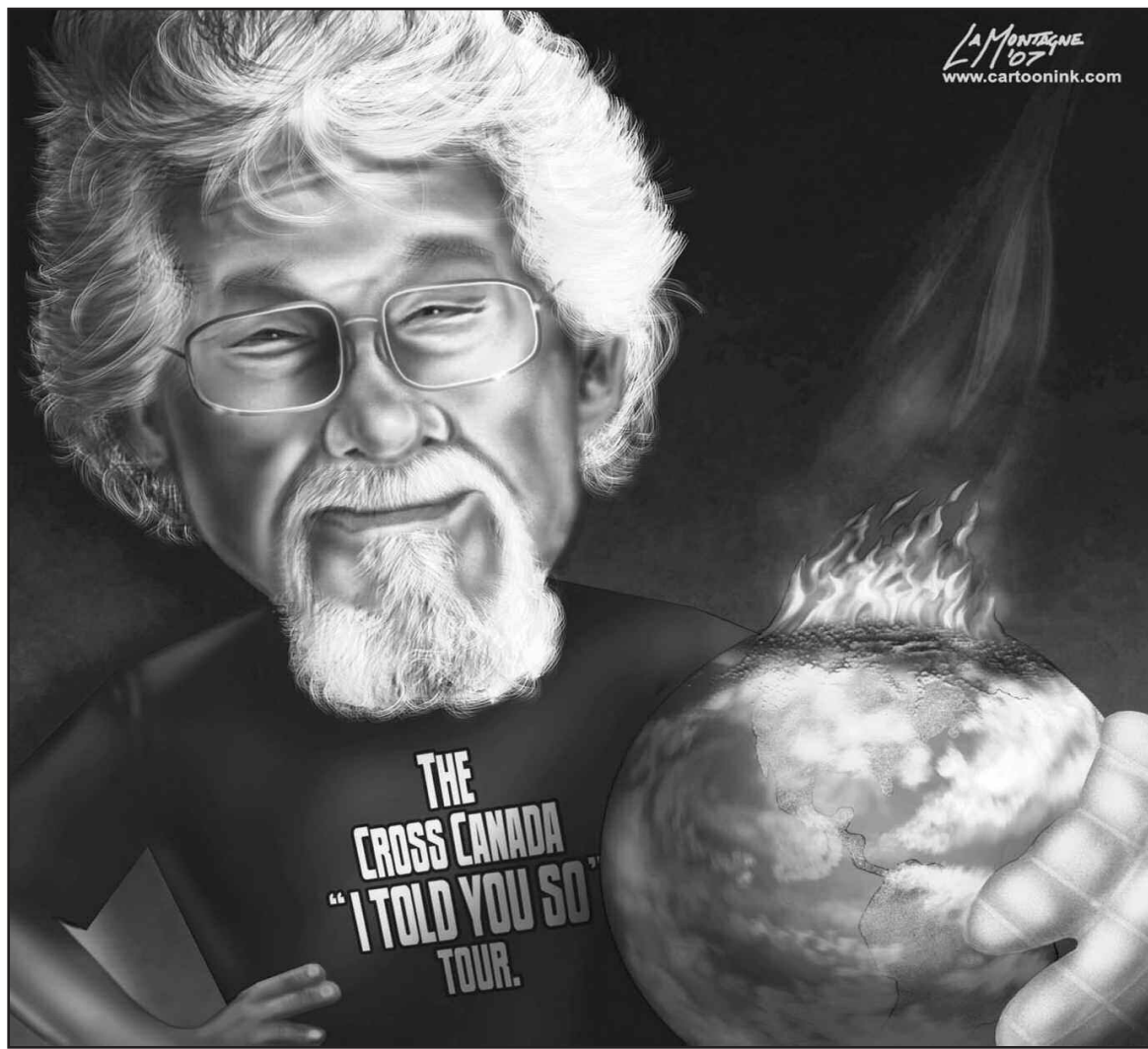
Integration Networks, Ontario Municipal Board, Ontario Lottery and Gaming Commission, electric utilities or parks commissions. These public institutions, which have a huge impact on the lives of people in this community, currently operate under rules that allow them to exclude anyone they want from meetings for any reason. These rules offer the public no way to challenge the decisions of these groups to shut the public out of what otherwise would be an open meeting.

Although Bill 130 allows us to challenge a decision, it offers no consequences for a council that breaks the law other than a public report that confirms it.

To address these concerns Niagara Falls MPP Kim Craitor has introduced a Private Member's Bill – the Transparency in Public Matters Act – that would force meetings of these bodies (as well as municipalities) to be open to the public and would allow citizens to stand up for their right to access how decisions are made. Like Bill 130 it gives the public the right to challenge the closure of a public meeting; but unlike Bill 130 it allows the Information and Privacy Commissioner to disallow any decisions taken during an improperly held secret meeting. It also standardizes the list of reasons the public could legitimately be kept from the process, which is important given the hodgepodge of regulations that currently apply or, as with some public bodies, the whims of their members.

Across Ontario there is a fatigue with governments at all levels. People, who are interested in being involved in the decisions that shape their communities, get frustrated when they are stonewalled by the very organizations created to work on their behalf. Ontario needs strong, enforceable laws that make it not only easy, but in many cases possible, for citizens to participate in the process. The Transparency in Public Matters Act goes a long way towards making that a reality. But without the support of concerned and involved citizens, the Private Member's Bill may die.

Its death would continue the disenchantment with our political process, which will only lead to greater public sector secrecy and further alienate people from those who supposedly work on our behalf.



The new century offers challenges for all. Prime Minister Stephen Harper must find a way to get fair trade for our manufacturing and agricultural sectors because those are the twin pillars of economic prosperity. He has called the Chinese on human rights issues. Now he must do the same on trade inequities with other Asian nations. And still no progress on the issue of U.S. farm subsidies

I recently read a columnist who blames everything on the union movement. But I can't name a group in Canada that has been more faithful to the principles we all espouse. For instance, social justice for all, universal health care, support for causes that benefit all, like the United Way. Canadian unions are unlikely culprits for economic dislocations.

In Ontario, we have seen many instances of bad feelings between First Nations and the police. There is plenty of fault to go around, but keep in mind the police are very often

thrown between warring parties, like a marital dispute on a larger scale. The OPP has just concluded a special campaign to collect



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new and like-new children's books for aboriginal children. These books were sent to the Canadian Forces who handled the distribution – certainly a promising start at reconciliation.

Every generation faces challenges, none more daunting than those that faced the parents of the baby boomers. David Halberstam wrote a book about them entitled "The Greatest Generation". As teens they lived through the Great Depression. Then

many went off to war for years. Returning, they found crumbling infrastructure and too many people for too few jobs. But it was this generation that set the stage for everything we have today.

The late Hugh Newman told me about the community spirit that characterized the post war years in Essex. "Most felt we just had to get involved, just had to do something to make life better for everyone," he said. Thus the community spirit Essex offers today was born.

It's goodwill and the will to get going that ensure a caring community with a growing economic base. Local politicians and leaders must put their personal agendas to one side, and have the will to listen to the opinions of all segments of our community, including youth and seniors. It is then and only then that the community spirit bequeathed to us by the Greatest Generation can re-light the spark that has given Essex a reputation as a town of volunteers working together.



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