

Free speech comes at a price

by SHERALYN ROMAN

It would be an understatement to say there has been a lot happening in Caledon these past few months. Resident concerns are many and Council meetings have been fractious. It doesn't have to be this way, but residents would be forgiven for thinking their right to free speech now comes at a price.

That price might include feeling limited in when and how they can express themselves, and concerns about who might be in the room (and why) while they exercise their right to free speech.

You may recall a column back in July where we expressed concerns about the fact that three uniformed OPP officers just happened to be at a Council meeting where many residents had expressed their intent to delegate.

For those who don't attend Council regularly, delegating is when area residents may enter their name into the public record, prepare slides if they wish to or simply come prepared to read a statement before Council members, articulating their concerns on a particular agenda item.

Somehow, the OPP were able to intuit that more residents than usual would attend Council that evening and were conveniently on hand to clear Council chambers.

Fire code violations was the official excuse given, but how was it police just happened to be there? Safety matters, don't get me wrong, but everything about the preparedness of the police to clear the room just felt off. It makes one wonder, since residents may also delegate virtually are we entering an era where it might be safer to delegate from the comfort of your own home to ensure your voice is heard?

Some residents might start to think a virtual delegation is in their better interests if OPP are now going to be regularly attending public meetings.

I bring this issue up again because since July, it appears not much has changed.

Once again, this time allegedly at the behest of the Town, OPP attended another public meeting, this one concerning proposed changes to the Site Alteration Bylaw which will impact where, and what kind of construction garbage, developers can dump.

Worse still, those officers were attending the public meeting in plain clothes so most attendees likely had no idea police were even there. Why? Why were OPP called in the first place? Why are police attending public meetings? Are we (the public) at risk and if so from whom and for what reason? Are police there to keep the peace, disperse residents or to protect us? Some residents might even feel dissuaded from sharing their concerns because of this police presence, it being something we are not typically familiar with here in Canada because, well, allegedly we're a democracy.

It isn't just the cost of free speech either, although that's the main thing. What about the actual cost of sending at least three undercover OPP officers to a simple bylaw open house? Oh, and one final item of note: under the new proposed Site Alteration bylaw it will be the Commissioner of Engineering, Public Works and Transportation alone, who, as an employee of the Town would be able to approve, amend or revoke permits, decide when public meetings are needed and even decide if larger applications (over 10,000 cubic metres) need Council approval or not.

Who exactly have we elected to speak on our behalf, and is this proposed inclusion in the bylaw yet another way of potentially silencing those, and thus also residents' voices?

Finally, speaking of silencing, when an Integrity Commissioner (IC) says we shouldn't be allowed to delegate to Council on the results of any of his investigations, one can't help but wonder why.

In a recent letter that formed part of the agenda for the Tuesday, October 7 Council meeting, IC David G. Boghosian, recommended the exclusion of delegations on agenda items related to Integrity Commissioner investigation findings.?

What this means is that when someone, for example, in this case Councillor Dave Sheen, attempted to speak out on behalf of his constituents and a complaint was brought forward about him, no one, other than the Councillor himself would be able to comment on the IC's report. This would be true for anyone being investigated, whether it was this Councillor or any others duly elected to speak on our behalf.

Since any Councillor who is investigated by an IC must act in his or her own defense and determine, if they can afford it at their own expense, whether they need legal counsel or not, resident advocacy is perhaps one of the only ways they might feel like their continued voice on Council is worth the effort.

If we can't delegate, and/or advocate, on any agenda item at Council, it all just smells like one more way the democratic process is being silenced.

One really has to wonder about the price of free speech.?