

Editorial: They did what!?
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Last week, three Whitby councillors hunkered down in Town Hall during a Special Council meeting when the rest of council was at home attending the meeting virtually. Furthermore, some had been going into the building frequently during the pandemic closures.

Town Hall, like all Whitby buildings, had been closed for some time. Yet Councillors Chris Leahy (Regional), Deidre Newman (West Ward) and JoAnne Drumm (Centre Ward) all chose to enter the building without notifying anyone. During the 32-minute audio-only meeting, Mayor Don Mitchell commented he did not know this was happening and would have liked to have been apprised.

The actions of the three elected officials were sneaky, stunning in their arrogance and appalling in their lack of empathy for Town staff. As well, they abrogated the responsibilities required for an elected, taxpayer-paid, leadership position.

It brings to mind a somewhat rhetorical question those in positions of authority have been known to ask: What were you thinking?

Except that in this case, it's clear what they were thinking, even if their thinking wasn't at all clear. Councillor Leahy whined about the noise from his children and other distractions in his "open space" home. He'd been frequenting the building to take advantage of the quiet. Evidently he stands alone in Canada as the sole adult who cannot work at home as he is unable to find a less noisy corner of the house and manage children being children during a pandemic.

North Ward Councillor Steve Lee, to his credit, sliced his colleague into bite-sized bits by stating he, too, has a home full of children and struggles to locate a spot far from everyone. Yet he still manages. (He didn't mention that he also runs a photography business from home.)

Leahy added he would continue to go into Town Hall, even after the entire council, save for two others, called him out on it.

Councillor Newman, a lawyer, tried to draw the parallel between working in her law office and working in Town Hall as a councillor. She said she wore a mask and used other safeguards when dealing with clients in her practice and was being similarly careful at Town Hall. She referred to the province not placing restrictions on municipal meetings so long as proper precautions were followed.

Councillor Drumm's lame defence rested on needing help with technology which, one presumes, means she'd require Town staff to assist with, hence her being in the building. No risk there, of course.

In the end, a vote was taken to defer that meeting to another day with the expectation it would be a virtual meeting. Both Leahy and Newman voted against the motion as they planned to continue going into Town Hall. Councillor Steve Yamada (Regional) voted with them. He, too, had commented on home distractions yet had attended the meeting virtually. Why he joined them on the vote is both bizarre and puzzling. So, Councillor, you figure it's fine for them to work in Town Hall during this social distancing era but won't do it yourself? You sound either confused or conflicted. Either way, not a good fit.

The actions of these councillors were inappropriate on a few levels. In fact, the word "inappropriate" here seems wildly inappropriate. Council had agreed to hold virtual meetings for the obvious reason of safety. Indeed, though each person's circumstances are different (as Newman said, stating the obvious), that's about as lame an argument as one could muster these days. Leahy and Newman might as well have announced that all people dealing with such home distractions are less important than them. Flaunting council's virtual meetings was justified because they'd taken necessary precautions, as if no one else in the workforce, confronted with similar problems, had done so.

Stating they would continue going into the building to work or attend virtual meetings reflects an arrogance of such high order that one wonders if perhaps they're suffering from a syndrome of delusion.

Newman's point about the province not expressly forbidding it is true. So what? As we might say to our noisy, distracting kids (and barking dogs - and ringing doorbells - and loud TVs), just because it wasn't forbidden doesn't make it right. This was not right.

I am frankly a bit disappointed with the mayor's response which was understated to the point of being "soft." I would have thought a firm verbal spanking would be in order. Perhaps he takes the view that adults need to be treated as such and that their decisions are theirs to live with. Except in this case, we are talking about a killer virus, not a vote on whether a stoplight is warranted somewhere. This was one of those exceptional times when mayoral decorum could have been set aside and no one would have faulted him, save for the objects of the scorn.

Then there's leadership, that characteristic we hope our elected officials either have or develop. They ought to be able and willing to not only show us the way but also join us on the journey.

The event displayed, in livid colour, which of our councillors lack in this regard. At a time when every organization requires its leaders to step up and do the right thing, these councillors stepped down and didn't.

Sadly, the next election isn't for another 29 months. Here's hoping constituents have long memories.

How to access the audio of the May 4 meeting of Special Council:

> Go to Whitby.ca

> Click Council and committee meetings

> Click Archived video

> Click May 4 special council

> Click on video below - even though it's just an audio as it was a virtual meeting

> Click Under Council and Committee Video Archive, click Special Council

> Click May 4, 2020