

Subject: Stand down the Blue Ribbon Panel: A plea for maturity

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From: Elizabeth James <cagebc@yahoo.com>

To: "Clr. Crist" <cris@district.north-van.bc.ca>, Mayor Bell and Council <council@dnv.org>, James Ridge CAO <james_ridge@dnv.org>

CC: fonvca@fonvca.org

18 May 2004

Clr. Ernie Crist,
DISTRICT OF NORTH VANCOUVER
355 West Queens
NORTH VANCOUVER, B.C.

RE: Staff and Council relationships: Responsibility to citizens

Dear Councillor Crist:

I have received your recent email, in which you comment again on your differences of opinion with Mayor Bell and some members of staff. I have also received a copy of Mayor Bell's letter to you of May 11, 2004.

By now, you will have realized that I have opted not to comment much on this dispute, ongoing since 2001. My reason for taking what amounts to a hands off approach is that, along with most others, what I know of the affair has come from you, from the Mayor, from Council discussion, from email exchanges and from the media. This gives me little confidence that I have sufficient details upon which to base a valid opinion.

Upon reflection, however, I believe that for me to continue to remain silent may well be misconstrued; hence this message. In order to do the matter justice, I regret this is not likely to be a short, off-the-cuff, note.

By your own admission, the part you played in the 2001 incident was not appropriate; hence your apology to Ms. Burrows. That said, what has never been explained to my satisfaction is what caused Ms. Burrows' uncharacteristic lack of cooperation when you asked to see a copy of the draft Council Agenda. Was she just having a bad afternoon, or had she been told by someone not to allow you to see the draft?

If the latter was the case, who was it who issued that directive - and why? It is important for the question to be answered, for it was that action that set into motion a whole series of events - events that are adversely affecting the business of the District to this day.

There is no doubt that, whether the decision to withhold the draft from you was an arbitrary one on the part of Ms. Burrows, or a more disturbing one from another source, it was not an acceptable response to a request from an elected official - and it was met with an equally inappropriate reaction from you.

What is also unacceptable in my view, is the fact that the fallout from an incident which occurred in 2001 has not been dealt with satisfactorily to this day. In fact, it is not likely to be concluded before the end of 2004 - if then. The question is: Why not? There were/are certainly enough options open to any and all of the parties involved...

- If Ms. Burrows felt the incident was serious enough, she could have enforced her Charter rights. She did not.
- If the RCMP felt the incident was a serious one, they could have pursued the matter but chose not to do so.
- If you felt/feel you were unjustly accused, you were/are free to take the matter to court. You have not done so.
- If the Mayor felt the incident was serious enough, he should have exerted his authority under the Local Government Act to force a legal resolution of the matter long before now. He did not.

Instead, the embers have been allowed to smoulder - poked into flames at periodic intervals at considerable direct and indirect cost to District citizens - for the better part of three years.

Costs have accrued - and continue to accrue - for staff time/materials, council time, and legal fees. Indirect costs relate to the fact that you now do not have normal working access to members of staff, that you have been unable - or less than willing - to assume committee functions and also to a sour working climate. This displays an abominable lack of consideration for the taxpayer who must foot the bill.

I must admit that, based upon what I have seen and heard from all sides to date, I do believe there to be a considerable political element at work in all of this. In my opinion, citizens have right to expect that Mayor Bell - with all of his years on Council - should have been able to deal with this matter competently and with dispatch. Citizens also have the right to expect that he would be fair to all parties.

Instead, my impression is that he has been lax at best - choosing to allow the matter to hang, unresolved, rather than to enforce arbitration within a very few months of the precipitating event. In my opinion, good leadership has gone wanting.

For your own part.....one of the reasons I would have preferred an enforced arbitration is that it was obvious from the beginning that, while you were not prepared to give an inch beyond your original apology, neither is it your nature to sit silent if, in your opinion, an injustice has been done. Fair enough, nor should you. Unfortunately, though, you were not prepared to take the final step - viz. that of proving your case in court.

Now, no matter what the decision of the Blue Ribbon panel, no one will come out a winner. Not Ms. Burrows, who has undergone 3 or more years of unpleasantness; not Mayor Bell who, in my opinion, has displayed no capacity for discerning leadership; not the members of two councils; and certainly not the taxpayer who must pay the bills for work not done.

What I regret most in all of this is that a man such as yourself who, of anyone in the District past or present, has tirelessly given of himself to ensure democracy and the very best of communities, now faces a virtual tribunal for sins past, present and future, as he winds down his career - all because no-one had a better idea as to how to handle it.

In closing, I would be remiss if I did not include the following comment: In all my years of trying to make a positive contribution to our Canadian democracy, there has been no-one - absolutely no-one - who has given me more immediate and useful assistance and encouragement than yourself. Certainly, we do not always agree but I believe that, in agreeing to disagree, there is always respect on both sides.

It saddens me beyond belief that, even at this late hour, Mr. Ridge could not exert his influence to bring you, the Mayor and Ms. Burrows into a quiet space with either himself or an arms-length arbitrator to bring this matter to a happier conclusion.....That, of course, would require *all* parties - yes, including you - to give a little; to show maturity and determination enough to put citizens first by reaching a compromise that can carry us through to the next election; and to open and close the meeting by shaking hands all round....

But perhaps I place too much faith in the ability of human beings to get along and do right by one another.

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