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If You Can't See It, You Can't Stop It
Why Ontario's Democracy Is in Danger

When those in power decide the public no longer has the right to see their decisions, the first thing to disappear is trust. That is exactly what Ontario's Conservative government is proposing with changes to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. If these changes pass, cabinet ministers, political staff, and even the premier's office could operate entirely out of public view, hiding emails, messages, and communications from the citizens they are supposed to serve.

This is not a small administrative change. This is a fundamental attack on democracy. The people making the decisions that shape land, finances, communities, and programs would be shielded from scrutiny. Citizens would have no way of knowing what deals are made, what advice is given, or who benefits. Decisions that should be public could vanish behind closed doors, leaving the public entirely in the dark.

I am profoundly disappointed in Premier Doug Ford for even considering this. After scandals have already emerged under his government, one must ask: what is left to hide? What conversations with developers, lobbyists, and well-connected insiders are happening right now that the public will never see? Why would any government want to operate in secret unless they are avoiding accountability?

Freedom-of-information requests are the only reason Ontarians know the truth about past scandals. Without them, we would never have discovered the Greenbelt scandal here in Pickering, where decisions about protected land enriched private interests. We would not have learned about the ArriveCAN contracts that raised troubling questions, or the WE Charity student grant program mismanagement. These were not minor missteps—they were decisions made in secrecy, affecting millions, and in some cases, benefiting private interests while the public paid the price.

And make no mistake: without FOI laws, this pattern would continue unchecked. Ministers could meet, communicate, and direct policy behind closed doors, with no accountability. Citizens could never know if decisions are made for the public good or for special interests. That is not government. That is power without responsibility. That is corruption, in the broadest sense, and it is what transparency laws are designed to prevent.

The problem is not limited to Queen's Park. Across Ontario, citizens are using FOI requests to understand how their local governments operate. In Pickering, residents have challenged the city over incomplete responses, while record-retention policies are being changed, leaving citizens wondering what is being withheld and for how long. These are not abstract concerns. They are a warning about what happens when power is hidden from the people.

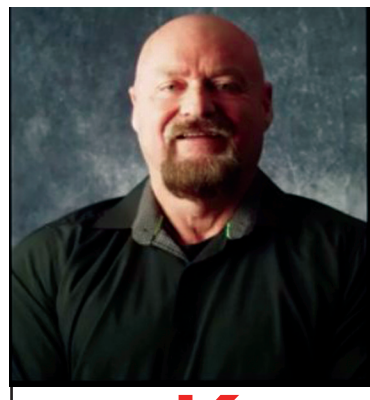
Democracy does not survive in the shadows. Every conversation, every email, every note from a minister, every meeting with a developer or lobbyist should be accessible to the people who elected them. Public office is not private property. It is a public trust.

If governments are making decisions in the public interest, why hide them? If there is nothing to hide, why reduce access to records? When transparency is limited, suspicion flourishes. When accountability disappears, corruption can thrive. And when citizens cannot see, they cannot stop it.

Ontarians should not accept a system where power operates in secret. We deserve the right to ask questions, to see the evidence, and to hold those in power accountable. Every conversation that shapes policy, every deal that impacts communities, every decision that affects public funds belongs to the people. Not to ministers. Not to political staff. Not to special interests.

The question we must all ask ourselves—and our government—is this: why are they hiding? What are they hoping we never see? And what else is happening behind those closed doors that will affect our communities, our land, and our lives?

Because if the public cannot see it, they cannot stop it. And a government that the people cannot see is no longer a government for the people—it is a government for itself.



THE Mr. X Files

By John Mutton

CENTRAL EXCLUSIVE

Karmageddon

By Mr. 'X' ~ John Mutton
CENTRAL EXCLUSIVE

Municipal democracy is not just about votes.
It is also about conversation.

The Municipal Severance Loophole Nobody Talks About.

In municipal politics, there are many policies that sit quietly in the background—rarely discussed, rarely questioned, and often assumed to be functioning exactly as intended. But every once in a while, when you look closely at the language of these policies, you discover something remarkable: a structural oversight that has been hiding in plain sight for years. One such issue exists within the severance policies governing elected officials in many municipalities, including the Municipality of Clarington and the Regional Municipality of Durham.

On its face, the policy appears straightforward and reasonable. Councillors who leave office receive severance calculated as one month of remuneration for every year of service. The rationale behind this type of policy is not difficult to understand. Municipal councillors often dedicate years—sometimes decades—of their lives to public service. Unlike many private sector positions, elected officials do notaccumulate pensions in the same way and do not enjoy traditional job security. Severance provisions are therefore often framed as a modest bridge between terms of office, providing a transition cushion as individuals move back into private life.

But when we examine the policy more carefully, a fundamental question emerges.

What happens when a councillor leaves office, collects severance, and then returns to serve again? The current language of the policy, at least as publicly understood, does not appear to address this situation directly. It simply provides that a councillor is entitled to one month of remuneration for each year of service upon leaving office. What it does not explicitly clarify is whether previous severance payments are taken into account if that individual later returns to council. This seemingly small omission opens the door to a scenario that many taxpayers would likely find surprising.

Consider the following example.

A councillor serves ten years in office. At the conclusion of their time on council—whether through electoral defeat or voluntary retirement—they receive severance equal to ten months of remuneration. At that point, the policy has functioned exactly as intended.

But suppose that individual decides to return to politics a few years later. They run again, win a seat on council, and serve another term or two. When they leave office a second time, the policy once again calculates severance based on years of service. If the policy does not account for prior severance payments, that individual could potentially receive another full severance payout for the subsequent period of service. In other words, the policy could allow multiple severance payouts to the same individual over the course of their political career. To be clear, this situation is not necessarily the result of wrongdoing by any councillor. Elected officials operate within the rules that are established by the municipality. If the rules permit multiple severance payouts, then those payouts occur because the policy itself allows them. The issue, therefore, is not about personalities or individual councillors. It is about policy design. Most modern compensation frameworks—whether in the private sector or the broader public sector—contain safeguards to prevent this type of repeated severance exposure. Organizations typically address the issue through one of several mechanisms.

One approach is the lifetime cap. Under this model, severance payments are limited to a maximum amount—often twelve months of remuneration—over the course of an individual's entire service history. Once that cap is reached, no additional severance can be paid.

Another approach is the prior payment deduction model. In this system, any severance previously received is deducted from future entitlements. For example, if a councillor previously received six months of severance and the policy allows a maximum of twelve months, the most they could receive in the future would be the remaining six months.

A third method involves defining severance strictly in terms of continuous service immediately preceding departure from office. Under such a structure, if an individual leaves council and later returns after a break in service, their earlier tenure does not accumulate again toward severance calculations. Some municipalities have adopted an even simpler solution: severance may only be paid once to any individual regardless of the number of separate terms served. Each of these approaches addresses the same core principle—ensuring that severance functions as a transitional support mechanism rather than a recurring benefit. Without such safeguards, severance policies can begin to resemble something they were never intended to be: a form of episodic compensation tied to electoral cycles rather than genuine employment transition.

Why does this matter?

Municipal government operates on public trust. Every dollar paid in compensation, benefits, or severance ultimately comes from taxpayers. Even when payments are legally permissible under existing policies, the perception of repeated severance payouts can undermine confidence in municipal governance.

In an era when municipalities are asking residents to absorb higher property taxes, infrastructure levies,and development charges, transparency and discipline in compensation policies become especially important.

The solution to this issue is not complicated.

A simple amendment to the severance policy could read as follows:

"For the purposes of severance entitlement, cumulative severance payments to any individual shall not exceed twelve months of remuneration over the course of their service to the municipality. Any severance previously paid shall be deducted from future entitlements." Such language would immediately close the loophole while still preserving the original purpose of severance—to provide reasonable transitional support for those leaving public office after meaningful service.

Importantly, this type of policy reform is not punitive. It does not target current councillors, nor does it diminish the value of public service. Instead, it aligns municipal compensation frameworks with widely accepted governance standards. Good policy should anticipate real-world scenarios. It should account for the fact that political careers are rarely linear. Councillors may step away from office and later return. Electoral outcomes can change over time. Policies should therefore be robust enough to handle those realities without creating unintended financial exposure.

At its best, municipal governance is about stewardship—of infrastructure, of community resources, and of taxpayer dollars. Reviewing compensation policies through that lens is simply part of responsible administration. Sometimes the most important governance reforms are not dramatic. They do not involve billion-dollar infrastructure projects or sweeping legislative change. Sometimes they are as simple as tightening a few lines of policy language to ensure that the rules operate exactly as intended. The severance framework governing municipal councillors may well be one of those cases. And as with many issues in municipal government, the first step toward improvement is simply asking the question.