

MONKEY BUSINESS AT THE BOARD

By Frank Green

“That concludes the public portion of the meeting; we’ll be going in camera now,” announced the Chair of the Board at the regular monthly meeting of Temple College, one of the largest community colleges in Ontario. Temple had its main campus near the outer edge of Greater Metropolitan Toronto with half a dozen smaller campuses scattered around a fifty mile radius.

At the Chair’s decree, reporters from the Toronto Star, Globe and Mail and a few small town papers obediently headed for the door of the conference room. The two hour public meeting had been boring, full of canned “good news” announcements carefully orchestrated by the College’s Senior Administration to keep the Board in a happy somnolent state. Various committees had reported progress on the new policies for the naming of buildings after the most generous benefactors, interfacing with “major community players,” and the updating of the College’s Mission and Values Statements. After an hour’s discussion, consensus was achieved on the removal of four commas, deemed redundant, from the Mission Statement. Thelma Doors, VP of Vehicular Traffic and Parking Facilities, announced that she had persuaded the city to repair a couple of potholes near the main entrance. (Polite applause ensued, with cries of “great job, Thelma” and “good stuff.”)

Tom Wilcox, a Board Member who worked for Ontario Hydro announced his recent promotion to VP Public Relations. This was no surprise since he was one of the brightest bulbs on the Board. Tom attended the fewest meetings that he could but always had an intelligent comment when asked for input on any topic under discussion.

Announcements of their promotions by Board Members occurred at almost every meeting, since the Board was, for the most part, a “resume” board. Up and comers in large companies, entrepreneurs in smaller companies, lawyers, accountants and administrators in various social agencies routinely sought appointments to community college, university and hospital boards as a way to advance their career aspirations by establishing their community service bona fides.

“Nothing wrong with that,” Elaine Waverley, the crusty English teacher who served as the Faculty Representative to the Board, was fond of saying. “There’s nothing wrong with career ambition, if they would just do their homework and come to the meetings ready to discuss the issues.” Instead, with very few exceptions and only on rare occasions, the community (see below) Board Members spent little time reading the mountain of written material prepared by Administration for every meeting, said very little and made their main aim to get the meetings over quickly by simply rubber-stamping whatever course of action the President proposed.

Board Member Gloria Dutton, who worked at her Daddy’s construction firm, confined her remarks during five years of meetings to the query, “Is the coffee ready?”

“Elaine, let’s not be too hard on Gloria,” said Big Tom Robertson, an electrician who represented the College’s support staff, “she has a wonderful fashion sense and her mini-skirts certainly brighten the visual ambiance of the meetings.”

“Right,” Elaine grimaced.

There were two kinds of College Board Members. Twelve “community” members were appointed by a provincial government body from a list of suggested members submitted by the existing local College Board. They served one or two three-year terms.

Four “internal” members were elected by the four constituencies inside the College: students, faculty, support staff and administration. They could be elected for a maximum of two consecutive three-year terms. Since they could not be elected to be Chair or Vice-Chair of the Board, their status as board members was inherently second class. Strangely, the fact that they were elected by an internal constituent group lowered their status in the eyes of community members. So much for democracy!

Tensions simmered and sometimes boiled over between the community and internal governor groups. One community board member, Don Donaldson, a small town lawyer, always brought a novel to the meetings, and as soon as any internal governor started to speak, he made a great show of opening the book, lifting it up to his face, sighing loudly and reading until the troublesome intervention was over.

A few Board Members contained their zeal for holding Administration accountable for another, more direct career consideration. They hoped for a move into the Administration of the College shortly after their term on the Board ended. Because provincial regulations were delightfully vague about conflict of interest for college, university and hospital board members, and there was no requirement for a mandatory waiting period of some years between serving on a board and joining the administration overseen by that board, a board member could move to administration immediately after their board term ended.

Two years previously, Ray Tomas, who owned a small accounting firm, and had been a firm and constant supporter of Administration, twice serving as Chair of the President’s Evaluation Committee, had become Internal Auditor at the College, with a fifty per cent increase in his annual income, only three months after his term on the Board terminated. No one on the Board or at the Ministry even blinked.

The only slightly jarring news during the meeting occurred when President Bob “Scooter” Smith announced that for the fifth year in a row, the annual College Christmas Lottery had failed to turn a profit. Without going into precise figures about the losses, he acknowledged that the \$20,000 prize money was a bit of a lost litre for the College, but stressed that the whole thing had been a “great learning experience” and had, indeed, created a lot of good will and positive PR for the College. Most Board Members nodded sage agreement. “Yep, very good optics, very good optics,” murmured Tom Wilcox approvingly.

“Nothing worth reporting here,” muttered the Star reporter on the way out the door. One of the small town reporters already had her story written about a new college program, since it would be located in her paper’s home base.

The phrase “in camera” has an instructive history. Literally, it means: “in the chamber,” and the room referred to is the Star Chamber where secret trials and sentencing used to occur in medieval times. Theoretically, in present day Ontario, in camera sessions closed to the public are justified on public boards only for a personnel or delicate legal matter or when purchase or sale of property is being discussed. But in fact, that theory is honoured more in the breach than the observance. City and town councils, college, university and hospital boards use in camera sessions routinely to deal with any matter they fear might be controversial or potentially embarrassing.

“Since we have a new board member here tonight in the person of Anne Stewart who is the Personnel Director at Metropolitan Hospital, I thought it would be a good idea if we took a few minutes to explain our in camera policy and procedure,” said the Chair of the Board. “We have evolved our approach to quite a sophisticated level, Anne, so much so that we feel we are real leaders in the province, with three distinct levels of in camera sessions to meet the varying levels of secrecy required.”

“Our ever efficient secretary, Ms. Steno, has prepared an excellent power point presentation. Could you show it to us now, Stella?”

“Of course, Mr. Chair,” said the secretary, and the following graphics appeared on the screen after the lights dimmed:

Temple College In Camera Policy:

As Open as Expedience Allows

Level I - To deal with purchase or sale of college property. Faculty and other staff and student observers are usually allowed to remain in the meeting.

Level II - To deal with sticky personnel matters, usually with the hiring or firing of an upper level bureaucrat or some such embarrassing problem. Only the 17 Board Members and the dozen or so senior administrators habitually at Board Meetings are allowed to stay.

Level III -To deal with matters like the President’s evaluation. All Administrators must leave, with the exception of the President, who is an ex officio member of the Board.

“Single, Double and Triple Deep Throat,” whispered Elaine to Big Tom, “ wouldn’t Bernstein and Woodward be proud of us.”

The Level I session was very brief that evening, with only a couple of routine progress reports on property transactions. In Level II President Smith casually announced that Promotions, Contests and Raffles VP Bill “Smiley” Skelly, who had been in charge of the Christmas Lottery, was “no longer with the College,” the code phrase for getting canned. This passed by with no comment from Board Members except for a clearly audible stage whisper by Elaine Waverley to her seat mate and only regular ally, Big Tom Robertson, “I hope he found his exit a great learning experience.”

“I told Smiley he should stick with a fifty-fifty draw,” replied Big Tom, “it’s hard to lose money on those.”

This set the stage for Level III, or Triple Deep Throat. All the Senior Administrators left the room, even President Smith. This was unusual because the President usually insisted on staying, saying that, “it’s not healthy if the Board wants to meet behind the President’s back.”

“Oh, oh, something is up,” whispered Big Tom to Elaine.”

It soon became evident that, on the contrary, something was not up.

“There is a rather delicate personnel, and I suppose, personal, matter concerning the President,” began Dr. Brine Backwater, noted urologist and Chair of the Board, “so the President and I thought it best that he absent himself for this discussion. You know that Bob got married again last year to his lovely young wife, Clarabelle. Well, as we all know, sometimes there can be difficulties and a period of adjustments in a new marriage. And I’m firmly convinced, both as an experienced physician and Board Member, that a President happy in his personal life makes for a happy College. Indeed makes for a happy Board too, since, ultimately, it makes all of our jobs easier.”

“For chrisake,” whispered Elaine, I wish he’d get to the damn point.”

“Well now, how to put this delicately...it seems that Bob has had some problems in fulfilling his conjugal obligations,” continued the Chair.

“He can’t get it up?” blurted Elaine.

“Is that all it is?” said Board Member Joe Crawford, “for God’s sake, let him pay for the Viagra out of petty cash, and let’s get this meeting over with so we can get out of here.”

“Tell him to watch for anything over four hours,” whispered Elaine to Big Tom.

“Well, it’s not quite that simple,” said the Chair, “indeed in my professional capacity as a urologist, I suggested exactly that to Bob months ago. He’s tried Viagra and some of the other new products to the tune of a thousand dollars from petty cash, but he seems to have hit a really rough patch, or should I say, a soft spot. He’s appears to be one of that small percentage of men for whom these products are not effective.”

“But aren’t we setting a dangerous precedent here?” asked Big Tom, “surely these are personal problems and we already pay the President a big salary. He should be paying for his own medication.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong, Tom,” said Don Donaldson smugly, for once refraining from his novel. “As a lawyer, I can assure you,” he added in a superior and authoritative tone, “we set the precedent two years ago when we subsidized Bob for the legal costs of his last divorce. No precedent whatsoever is being set here.”

“You know my father was over seventy when he remarried long before there was Viagra,” chipped in Les Dunlop, an accountant with a large manufacturing company. “When he had some problems of this nature he talked it over with his doctor who told him there’s a monkey serum that has been used in Europe for decades. Charles De Gaulle, Konrad Adenauer and a lot of those old guys used it and kept going strong well into their eighties.”

“So, do you want me to get you some of this monkey serum?” the doctor asked my old man.”

“No, I think not Doc,’ said the old man, ‘I think I’d need a whole new monkey!’”

Half the Board broke out laughing, but the other half looked severely embarrassed.

“Funny you should mention the monkey serum, Les,” said the Chair, “Bob was referred to a specialist in New York City and he thinks that Bob would be a good candidate for a bilateral monkey testicle transplant operation.”

“Sweet Jesus!” exclaimed Elaine Waverley, “tell me you’re not serious. They stopped doing that voodoo operation years ago. I read all about it when I was doing my thesis on the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. He had the monkey gland operation when he was an old man and went crazy...half a dozen affairs with young girls... God knows how his wife stuck it out with him!”

“Well, Elaine, it’s not quite that simple,” replied Dr. Backwater. “As you know, my speciality is urology, and when I was at our annual conference last year in Honolulu, I heard a very interesting paper on this very topic. As recently as the nineteen fifties, Dr. Niehaus, a Swiss practitioner, claimed to be able to restore energy and concentration as well as sexual potency and enjoyment. No less a personage than Pope Pius XII consulted with him...although we’re not exactly sure why.”

“In any case, there has been a surge, as it were, of interest in the procedure for those men who do not respond to Viagra and the other new drugs,” continued the Chair. “Bob is very unhappy about his situation and has been told by the specialist in New York that he could get him into a small private clinic in Paris for the operation. Unfortunately, of course, OHIP would not pay for the operation in France.”

“Oh, oh,” said Big Tom, “I see where this is heading. How much for the operation?”

“Because of some of my longstanding connections with my professional colleagues and with the help of the doctor in New York, I think we could swing this for Bob for less than a hundred and fifty grand, excluding travel,” concluded Dr. Backwater, “and I would be pleased to entertain a motion for the Board to pay for up to that amount on a one time only basis.”

“So moved,” interjected Lucy Brighteyes, the Administrative Representative to the Board, head of the College’s PR Department.

Perhaps out of sympathy for the long ago plight of his late father, Les Dunlop, usually cautious in money matters, immediately seconded the motion.

During the very brief discussion Big Tom and Elaine objected strenuously to what they considered an abuse of Board spending authority, but when the question was called, they cast the only negative votes. Tom Wilcox abstained, citing PR concerns, “If this ever got out,”he said, “it would make for very bad optics, very bad.”

“In that very serious vein,” intoned Chair Backwater, “may I just remind all Board Members, and in particular Tom and Elaine, of the grave legal obligation to secrecy that we all have concerning matters discussed in camera.”

Later, Big Tom and Elaine tried to console themselves over yet another lost battle at the nearby Union Hall. As he reached for another beer, Big Tom said, “These goddam Board Meetings are more fun than a barrel of monkeys!”

2568 words

