

An unfortunate necessity to re-establish civil service civility

Heather Anne Wakeling Lister - July 2026

I had the great fortune to know Lewis Clifford Pearsall. Husband to my friend Cecile, Lewis was born in Australia, barely surviving WWII as a POW, he rebuilt his life in Canada and dedicated much of his time within community politics, championing democratic, social access to equity through opportunity.

Lewis had warned that there are people after their first taste of power, hunger toward self-serving, ego driven agendas--and that in a democracy we must watch out for them. As in democratic politics, especially at the community level, policy should never benefit an individual or clique, but service the greater good of that community. Whenever a meeting would heat up, with tempers interfering with relevant problem-solving discussions he'd say, "Stop. All of us. Remember why we are here. Not for ourselves, but for the community." This was before the 2000s when people still respected peacemakers.

Sound naïve? Lewis, more than most, knew victimization through war. He understood very well the consequences of unchecked divisive personalities in positions of power. Throughout his community service his words and actions reminded people that solution based discussions should draw from many threads of thought offered without threat to their personal well-being.

Having seen the havoc in Toronto when Rob Ford was mayor, and living in Sarnia's south-end for the past decade, I've watched the increase as rabid tempers rose, and zoom-meeting fire-walls created physical distance between council members.

Not relegated to Sarnia, but within other cities and towns, disrespectful behaviour has contributed to the implementation and subsequent passing on May 26 of the Ontario Big City Mayors (OBCM), Municipal Accountability Act 2026, or Bill 9. Deemed important to strengthen accountability and respect in our municipalities.

And until the passing of Bill 9, there had not been a way to thwart unmanageable, serious misconduct. With safeguards to protect electoral democracy, Bill 9 provides councils guidelines establishing appropriate behaviour toward colleagues and staff.

Summarized, Bill 9 implements specifics such as standardized rules for ethical behaviour, harassment, discrimination and use of public property and social media. Mandatory training, ongoing education regarding conduct, with elevating the Integrity Commission of Ontario to oversee, train and support municipal integrity commissioners.

And, for the first time, a two-part inquiry process that can lead to the removal and disqualification of an elected official has become law.

Addressing treatment of people with dignity and respect, especially between political rivals, Marianne Meed Ward, chair of OBCM and mayor of Burlington is quoted as stating: "Elected officials must be accountable and held to a higher standard."

Adding that "Democracy depends on respectful conduct, and this legislation helps ensure there are consequences for inappropriate behaviour. OBCM has been advocating on this issue for many years and we look forward to continuing our work with the province on the details of what should be included in the new standardized municipal code of conduct."

I asked Mayor Bradley for his thoughts on Bill 9. He answered that having spoken directly to the premier and the Municipal Affairs minister last August about the Bill, he supports the principle of the Bill but with reservations. Having serious concerns about the Bill's ability to bring care and control back into council chambers in Ontario, he has written to every mayor in Ontario sharing his support and concerns. While he received very strong support from them for changes to the Bill, the government did not recognize his concerns.

In an except from his letter to Premier Ford dated March 25, 2026, Mayor Bradley penned his caution regarding strengthening municipal accountability and public trust.

"The introduction of a standardized code of conduct and the proposed integrity commissioner reforms are positive and necessary steps forward. However, based on more than four decades of experience in municipal politics, I believe the Bill's greatest flaw lies in its mechanism for removing councillors in serious cases of misconduct.

Requiring local councils to participate in the removal of a peer, particularly through unanimous agreement, places councils in an inappropriate and untenable position.

On matters of serious contention, unanimity is rarely achievable, rendering the mechanism effectively futile."

Adding that "This approach undermines both fairness and public confidence and fails to provide municipalities with a meaningful ability to act in extreme cases. In circumstances of this magnitude, decisions should not rest with a council.

Instead, such matters should be heard and ruled upon by an independent, non-partisan authority, removed from local, political, dynamics and capable of making impartial determinations in the public's interest."

Bradly then states that “without meaningful change, the current conditions and lack of adequate protection will have a chilling effect on those considering public office at the municipal level. Capable, community-minded individuals may be discouraged from seeking election if there is no effective independent mechanism to address extreme misconduct, protect the integrity of council and the well-being of the community.”

And here I agree with our mayor regarding this flaw within Bill 9. The final step in the removal process is the requirement that in order to remove a councillor deemed unfit for office, the local city council must achieve a unanimous vote.

Realistic, or just a bite without teeth?

Meanwhile, I have shruggingly accepted that as a society we now have had to define and make into law standards regarding civil civility.