

Behind closed doors

letters

Surprise and Disgust

Secret and in-camera meetings have been flourishing lately in the Halifax Regional Council. A meeting goes in-camera when the members of a body decide that the matters they need to discuss should not be open to the public. Secret meetings are even worse: they are not even announced. There could be secret council meetings going on all the time and we might not have any knowledge of how our situation is being decided.

Last week, there were reports that urban councillors were set to have a secret meeting dealing with taxation for the whole regional municipality. Rural councillors were outraged when the idea was leaked — the meeting was quickly cancelled amid hasty denials of impropriety. It's quite possible that the meeting was in the best interests of everyone, but the process smells a little rank.

The ability of the public to scrutinize the decision-making process of their elected officials is a vital part of the democratic system. Whenever this ability is hampered, even if it may be for a straightforward reason, the process is tainted by the stain of deception.

Even in a body like a union, by definition ruled by its members, there are still instances of decision-making going on behind closed doors. This problem is present in our own student union. On several occasions the Dalhousie Student Union (DSU) has gone in-camera this fall, mostly for the purpose of electing people to various positions. The speeches by the applicants are open to the public, but the actual decision-making process is closed. Supposedly it's so Council can discuss the merits of the various candidates among themselves before making a decision. This debate, away from the eyes of Union members — that's every Dalhousie student — is mandated by the DSU Constitution.

The constitution also stipulates that the election of the positions

be by secret ballot. Now, I understand that rationale — voting by secret ballot allows one to vote in good conscience without worrying about how those around you will react. But why is it necessary for Council to discuss among themselves who is right for the job? What is it about a person who is applying for a position that

in-camera discussions?

I don't see why councillors can't read a few resumés, listen to the speeches, ask the candidates a few questions and then simply cast their secret ballot, but in the public view. By debating in secret, the suspicion arises that some nefarious plot in favour of one candidate is under way, that

The constitution states in Section 10, Clause 4, Part D that "Council may move in-camera...only by a two-thirds vote of Council. No minutes are kept. In-camera discussions are privileged information regarding the private affairs of the Union, and as such shall be considered confidential."

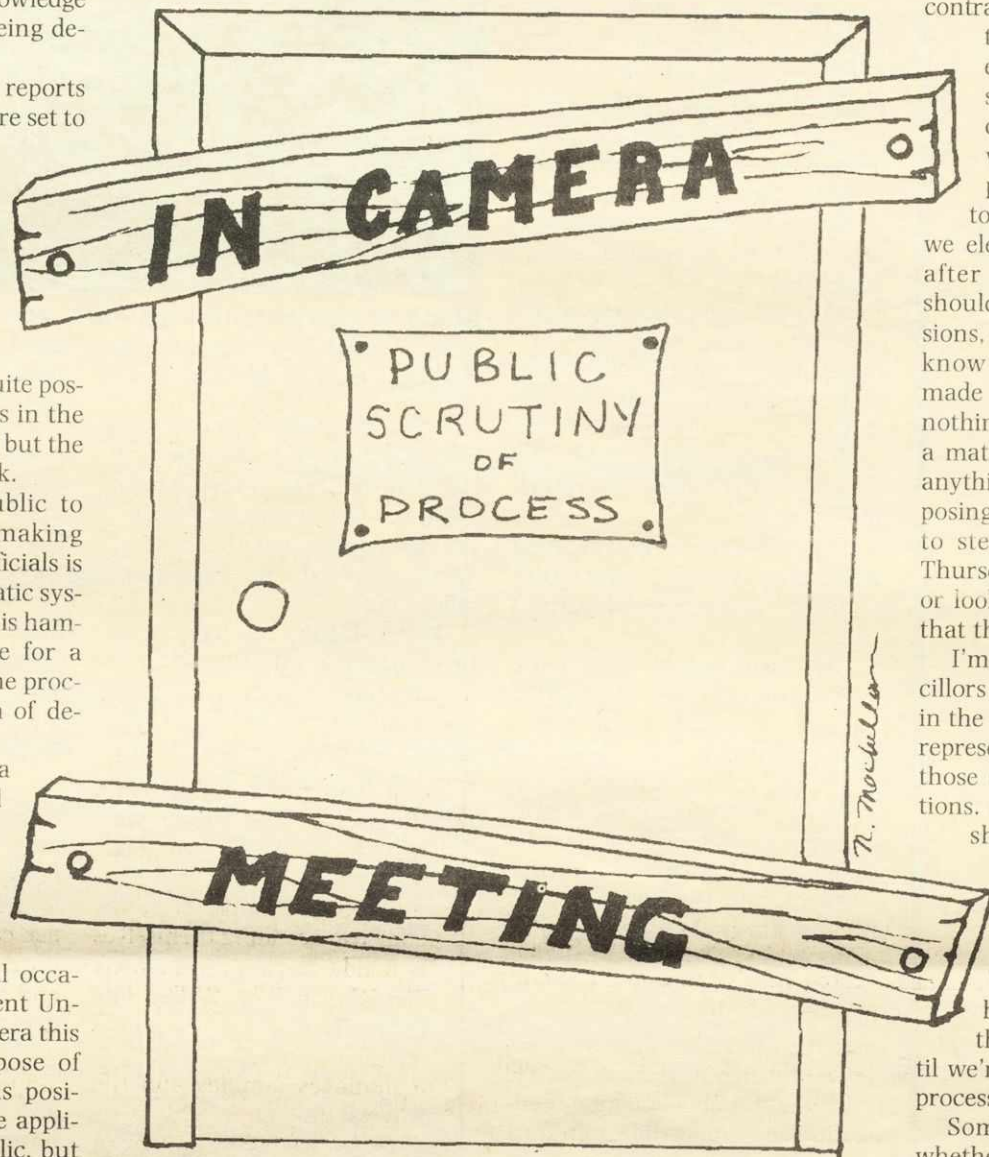
There is something inherently contradictory in "private affairs of the Union." While certain employee matters for SUB staff and the like should be conducted to respect the privacy of the individual employee, what does this have to do with Council? I thought we elected an executive to look after those matters. Council should be making the big decisions, and we have the right to know why our representatives made those decisions. After all, nothing that Council discusses is a matter of national security or anything. There are no SMU spies posing as Union members trying to steal the secret formula to Thursday nights at the Grawood, or looking to sabotage chairs so that they tip over easier.

I'm not suggesting that councillors shouldn't be trusted to act in the best interests of those they represent — they were elected by those same people to their positions. I don't think, however, we should just send them on their way without checking up on them once in awhile. That is, we should trust our elected officials, but to keep that trust healthy, we should distrust them from time to time until we're satisfied that the proper process is being followed.

Some of Council's decisions, whether policy or hiring, seem to defy logic. These decisions should be reached in front of the Union membership, so we can ask our representatives why they decided as they did. If the decision is not based on in-camera discussion, councillors will not be bound by rules of confidentiality. Open decision making, at the very least, will erase any whiff of suspicious action on the part of our elected body and satisfy incredulous curiosity.

Start coming to council meetings. You'll soon smell what I mean.

TIM COVERT



can't be discussed in public, especially when their employers — the students — are the public?

I'm sure Council, in some circumstances, has saved some candidates a modicum of embarrassment when they are rejected for embarrassing reasons. But the process seems entirely suspicious. What exactly do councillors have to decide in these

a few individuals on council are brow-beating the more impressionable members into unanimous decisions that those few want made.

Maybe that's something that should be changed in the constitution: that in-camera debate no longer be used on issues that councillors ultimately have to make for themselves.

the Dalhousie Gazette

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96 The Gazette will be publishing its last issue of 1996 next Thursday, December 5th. Our first issue of the new year will be published on Thursday, January 6th.

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Mr. Murphy was using the power of the media to try to manipulate the campus community against Custodians. The "Crack down on Pop Can Pirates" is a ruse. We know that the issue is not really about the cost of some pop cans, but is about a large and serious labour relations problem that we are experiencing, caused by Mr. Murphy. We see him as a liability to the University, not an asset. What we cannot understand is why the University continues to back him on his abuse of workers.

We wonder if Mike Murphy was acting on his own behalf and for his own personal reasons, or if he was acting on behalf of management. (Is Dal a good corporate citizen or just another corporate robber?)

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