

I would like to thank the members of the board and executive of the Westmount Municipal Association for their hard work and their dedication to the organization. This year, being the centennial year, has meant quite a few additional tasks that needed to be done, and there was never any shortage of willing volunteers. For that, I am truly grateful.

I also want to thank especially Francie Montgomery and Wanda Potrykus, two members of the executive who came on the board in 2006 and immediately took on some important responsibilities. They have recently resigned from the board, and we shall miss their energy and their talents.

I am going to tell you a little story. Back in 1993, when I first moved to Westmount, about 2 weeks after moving into our house on Lansdowne I received an official notice from the city that it was illegal to park 2 cars on the parking apron in the front of the house. Shocked and surprised, I went back to the original description of the property that the real estate people had put together. Yes, I had remembered correctly; the property had been advertised as having a parking apron for 2 cars.

I went to city hall to find out what was going on. The clerk said she couldn't give me the information about the dealings that the previous owner of the house had had with the city about the parking apron, but she invited me to fill in the form to request the information, under the Quebec Act respecting access to documents held by public bodies and the protection of personal information. In due course, I got the information I was looking for, but the entire process got me thinking.

Either the information was public or it was private; it couldn't be both. If public, why should it take a special law to get the government to release it? Because that is what the purpose of these freedom of information laws, also called sunshine laws, is: to get public bodies which hold public information to release it, which they otherwise wouldn't do voluntarily.

My wife Helen and I are both members of a chamber choir called the Orpheus Singers. At our spring concert a little over a week ago, we sang a piece called, "Lines from A Song for Occupations", which uses text from a poem by Walt Whitman. I would like to read to you a few lines from "A Song for Occupations"

by Walt Whitman: (book)

The message, I hope, is clear: governments work for us, and the information and the statistics governments collect is our information. We, the citizens and taxpayers, are the employers of governments, and we pay them to collect data which then belongs to us. It shouldn't take special laws to enforce that simplistic truth.

The reality is that many public bodies hold onto information jealously. But why? Because information is power, and that power is exercised by controlling the flow of information, who gets to see it and who doesn't.

So what's the big deal about power?

That is really a very complex question. When we lack power, for example when we're young, we may resent and envy those who do have power. Some of us choose to act on our principles, to work to become part of the system, to change that system from within, to make it more egalitarian, so that power is more evenly distributed.

Unfortunately, once we are in the system and we have some power ourselves, we are seduced by that power. We want to hang on to it. This may weaken our principles. Lord Acton, a historian, wrote that power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

We see examples around us all the time. In the Montreal mega-city, the Griffintown redevelopment project by Devimco, instead of being properly scrutinized by the body that exists specifically for that purpose, will be looked at by the borough council, who are likely to be less than critical of the project. And remember, this is a project that apparently fails to meet the requirements of the master development plan that the city drew up several years ago.

Here in Westmount, your municipal association has criticised city council for its lack of debate, and for not making its documents available to the public. We also take issue with what appears to be many decisions being made behind closed doors. These are all issues about information as power. Happily, there are some positive developments: a recent council meeting had some good

honest debate, and the city website now has an audio recording of the 28 April council meeting, minus question periods, available on its website for your listening pleasure!

We applaud developments in this direction. Westmount is well behind the cities who are leaders in transparency and openness, as an internet search can easily show. Your WMA board wants our city to be with the leaders. We want Westmount to be setting an example, not only to other cities but also to other levels of government. Yes, there will be a price to pay: we know that debate is time-consuming; making all meetings open means that councillors may need to be more careful about what they say; and putting more information out there for public consumption is sure to invite questions that may be difficult to answer.

But we believe that reducing the controls on the flow of information is vital for a well-functioning democracy. We call for, FREE INFORMATION! Free as in a free vote, or a free person, NOT free as in free beer!

Thank you.