

## Sound Off

# Let Public In

By Ken Brown

As a citizen of Peterborough, an alumnus and former employee of Trent University, I am extremely disappointed that we find Trent embroiled in financial and legal troubles – again ([Legal Battle Shapes up at University, Peterborough Examiner July 9](#)). That there are persistent problems is not, unfortunately, unexpected.

Do people know that our Ontario universities are exempt from the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act? Like all our publicly funded Ontario universities, Trent is not bound by this Act requiring public accountability and transparency. Without the application of this legislation to our Ontario universities we will never know the facts and details of the current (or past) legal and financial mess at Trent University. Without this open, transparent and prescribed form of disclosure, how can taxpayers and donors have confidence that the appropriate checks and balances are in place to assure there will not be further occurrences and that monies are spent appropriately and responsibly?

The commonly held assumption is that our universities are bound by this legislation; it defies logic and common sense that they are not. These public, charitable institutions receive significant amounts of public money. As the Ontario Chairperson of the Canadian Federation of Students, Joe Duff, said "Universities receive more than \$2 billion in funding each year... It follows that these institutions should be subject to the same standards of scrutiny and accountability as those of other publicly funded institutions."

Why should Ontario lag behind the other provinces which do subject their universities to Freedom of Information legislation? What could possibly justify our Ontario universities remaining out of reach of public scrutiny and accountability? There is growing and broad recognition that in this day and age no such justification exists and that our Ontario universities must be compelled to comply with Freedom of Information legislation.

The Globe and Mail reported that Ann Cavoukian, Ontario's Information and Privacy Commissioner, recently praised the new Liberal government for extending Freedom of Information legislation to Hydro One and

Ontario Power Generation and said it would be a "consistent and next logical step" to include all postsecondary education institutions and hospitals.

It is my opinion that we, as citizens of Peterborough and Ontario, must compel our MPPs to change the Freedom of Information Act to include our universities. In the continued absence of such accountability, and with the amount of taxpayer money involved, we remain in danger of proceeding down the same road that resulted in the Hydro One and Ontario Power Generation debacle, only this time involving our beloved Trent and other publicly funded universities. Are the citizens of Ontario expected to accept a "veil of secrecy" when it comes to our universities? Are we expected to continually bail universities out of financial and legal troubles in the absence of transparency and public accountability?

An amendment to the Freedom of Information Act to include our universities was proposed on May 12, 2004. Introduced by MPP Rosario Marchese, Bill 81 is entitled "An Act to amend the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act with respect to universities". It is a very short bill whose purpose is best described by its explanatory note: Universities are made "institutions" to which the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act applies. Would any reasonable person disagree that the imposition of scrutiny and accountability would assist to assure that a university education remains accessible and costs are kept in check?

As taxpayers, students (our future leaders) and concerned citizens, we should all contact our MPPs and press for our universities to become transparent and publicly accountable. Mr. McGuinty would be wise to accept the recommendations of Ms. Cavoukian and to champion the swift passage of Bill 81 and bring our universities under the Freedom of Information Act. This would be a very positive first step.

***Ken Brown is an Information Technology professional and concerned, long term Peterborough resident who might be spotted on occasion playing the fiddle at various community events.***

Sound Off is a forum to which Examiner readers are invited to contribute their view on issues they feel strongly about. The ideal length is 500 words or fewer. Those submissions not used in Sound Off may still be published as letters to the editor.