

Open Letter to Mayor Jim Diodati and Councillor Carolynn Ioannoni

City of Niagara Falls, Ontario

8 February 2018

Dear Mayor Diodati and Councillor Ioannoni,

Quotes from both of you in a February 6 article in the *Niagara Falls Review* included the word *mobbing*. This term comes from the research literature on workplace conflict. It means ganging up on someone, collectively ostracizing, punishing and humiliating him or her. As a professor at the University of Waterloo, I have studied mobbing for twenty years and am one of the main specialists in this field in North America.

Ms. Ioannoni claims to have been a target of mobbing in the workplace of city hall over the past 18 months. Mr. Diodati disagrees: “Nobody is mobbing her, nobody is bullying her, none of this is the case.”

To get beyond such butting of heads, social scientists have devised checklists of empirical mobbing indicators. Applying standard measures to available evidence, a skilled observer can then say to what extent, in what ways yes and in what ways no, a given dispute can accurately be called a case of workplace mobbing.

The Council meeting of 13 June 2017

Not as a researcher but simply as a Niagara Falls resident interested in civic affairs, I watched on Cogeco the Council meeting of 13 June 2017. The meeting got off to a routine start with several presentations, notably Noel Buckley’s impressive report on the convention centre. The meeting continued with decisions on planning matters.

Then came a sharp break from routine, a 57-minute time-out from business as usual (from 3:15 to 4:12 on the YouTube tape, p. 5 of the minutes). Nominally, it was a presentation and discussion of an Integrity Commissioner’s report. In fact, it appeared to be a pre-planned degradation ritual in which one by one, the mayor, councillors, and senior staff piled on Councillor Ioannoni, heaping shame and invective on her. Collective contempt for her was palpable, even when I first watched the proceeding live on TV at home. The ritual ended with a demand for apology, suspension of her pay, removal from boards and committees, and a call for her resignation.

Any expert on workplace mobbing, having watched that hour-long session, would identify it without hesitation as an unusually transparent, graphic case of workplace mobbing.

The single most definitive indicator was the unanimity of sentiment, with little nuance or variation. The message conveyed was unmistakable: “We *all* condemn you.” The decision at the

end was without a single dissenting vote. Even Councillor Craitor, who had proposed a lighter punishment, signed on.

Indicators confirming that this was no ordinary proceeding but a concerted personal attack include: (a) doubtful legal grounds for the investigation in the first place, namely a code of conduct written for municipal employees; (b) unclear procedures for the investigator's appointment and work; (c) fuzziness of the charges, nondisclosure of details about the alleged offense, the circumstances surrounding it, and any harmful consequences it may have had; (d) unusual timing and suddenness of the incursion on Ms. Ioannoni's position, catching her off guard; (e) personal disparagement of Ms. Ioannoni, as if she were "all bad"; (f) magnification of the alleged offense, a leak from an *in camera* meeting, into something far more serious than it normally is, without supporting evidence; and (g) imposition of draconian punishments beyond those laid down in the relevant legislation.

What mobbing does and does not mean

Dispassionate analysis of the Council proceeding of 13 June 2017 in light of the research literature yields a firm conclusion that this was indeed an instance of workplace mobbing. Ms. Ioannoni's assertion in the *Review* article is correct: she was mobbed by the mayor, her peers on Council, and senior staff. She was the target of an impassioned collective attack, out of proportion to any offense she may have committed.

Accordingly, Mr. Diodati's contention in the *Review* article is incorrect.

This is not to say that Ms. Ioannoni is right and Mr. Diodati is wrong on any or all of the public issues about which their disagreements are well known – the proposal with Ryerson University, for instance, or the development proposed by GR (CAN) Investment Co. In normal politics, each such issue is and should be openly debated and eventually resolved without anybody on Council being demonized or punished. What a mobbing episode like this one signifies is a breakdown of normal politics, nasty personalization of differences of opinion, to the detriment of sound decision-making.

Nor does the recognition that Ms. Ioannoni has been mobbed imply that the mobbers, the perpetrators of the process, were or are bad people. They are not. Each of them deserves respect for having stood for election to municipal office, for having been chosen by the city's voters, and for hard work and attention to the duties of public service. In this instance, they simply got carried away in a destructive direction – as can happen in any workplace.

The mobbing of Councillor Ioannoni suggests, however, independent of the personalities involved, a certain dysfunction in the current administration of our city. It suggests too much personalization of issues and taking of sides, too much groupthink.

In the same *Review* article referred to above, Councillor Wayne Campbell is quoted as saying he had not intended to run in the last election, but that "Jim Diodati called me on a personal basis and asked if I would run and he wanted me on his team."

Such is the context out of which workplace mobbing tends most often to occur. Municipal councils are officially nonpartisan in Ontario. Each Councillor is elected independently, not to serve on anybody's team but to form his or her own opinion, issue by issue, and vote accordingly.

When the mayor and councillors split differently on the varied issues that arise, this is a sign of healthy politics. When everybody except one or two lines up one way on issue after issue, democracy languishes and decisions get made that subvert the public good.

The future of municipal politics in Niagara Falls

It is a hopeful sign that Council has recently appointed or re-appointed Ms. Ioannoni to relevant boards. In light of research on mobbing, I do not expect that Council will formally retract the actions wrongly taken against this councillor on 13 June 2017. It is even harder for groups to admit mistakes than for individuals to do so. What is more likely is that Council will, little by little, push last year's attack on this councillor out of collective memory, and start giving her again the respect that she, like every other councillor, deserves.

In an email exchange with me half a dozen years ago, Mr. Diodati emphasized the principle that in municipal government, the focus should be kept on issues rather than persons. I agreed with him, noting that this is the first principle of Waterloo's Human Resources Department for the university workplace, and the first principle of the strategy I devised many years ago, for prevention of workplace mobbing.

We can all hope that Niagara Falls City Council will be able to follow this principle in the months ahead.

Respect, thanks, and best wishes to Mayor Diodati, Councillor Ioannoni, and everyone involved in the administration of our city government.



Kenneth Westhues
5419 River Road
Niagara Falls, Ontario L2E3H1
kwesthue@uwaterloo.ca