

Good evening; My name is Heather Wright, I live (redacted) Petrolia and own The Independent serving Petrolia and Central Lambton.

I'd like to address the conclusions of the Code of Conduct complaint on this evening's agenda.

The essence of the complaint was; the mayor released information that was only available to those with access to confidential in a staff/councillor conflict

A statement released to the media by the town about the conflict once Investigator John Fleming's November report was complete did not give names of the staff nor the councillor involved.

Those facts I knew because of a conversation I had with the councillor involved months before John Fleming was ever called to investigate.

So, when the town bylaw was presented about the fire chief's title changing, a month later I asked the mayor this simple question – and I'm reading directly from a transcription of the recorded conversation –

“I wondered if you could explain something for me. I noticed in the one of the bylaws. That Jay Arns. is - his title has changed to director of public services. What's that about?”

The mayor's answer, again verbatim from that recording; “Well, if you go back into that report, that was done by Mr. Fleming. And he recommended that

the fire chiefs job description be cleaned up.”

Until that moment, no one in the town – nor The Independent I might add – had named the fire chief as one of those involved in the conflict.

The mayor’s recollection of the interview paints a picture of The Independent which is more than a little unflattering but frankly typical – a dishonest journalist badgering a public official to say something they didn’t wish to say.

That was not the case.

The writer of the report says according to the mayor the reporter questions “quickly turned to learning more information about the public summary” and that the reporter continued to pressure him “over and over’ to provide further information regarding the investigation conducted by Mr. Fleming and the full scope of his report which she was “not happy to not have been given.”

Here are the facts. The mayor and I had a conversation that was 16 minute and 45 seconds long on Dec. 14.

We talked about several subjects,
including the budget and water rates,
the leave of absence of a councillor,
the town putting its meetings on YouTube,
a community wellness grant the town was applying

for

and - for two minutes and 55 seconds - the mayor and I talked about this bylaw –

I did not once raise the issue of the full scope of the Fleming report in that conversation. Not once.

The mayor is quoted as saying I had used - “trick questions” instead of “regular questions.”

Those so called “trick questions” were;

“So what, what will be the benefit of him being a director of public services, as opposed to the director of protective services, I don't understand that.”

And

“So I'm sorry, I just want make sure I understand this. So, then the bylaw enforcement part of his job now has been removed?”

and finally

“And so was the thought process there, Brad, that perhaps with the way his job description was worded, he felt empowered to take action in this situation?”

The mayor told that the article appeared so quickly, it must have been written before I spoke to him.

I've been working in the media for 35 years and put out two newspapers in two communities every week. I'd better be quick by now.

And by the way – quick does not automatically mean

sloppy. It can mean the writer is experienced and knowledgeable and is able to work quickly on a deadline – all skills sought after in the news media industry.

The writer of the report drew her conclusions that the Mayor's comments were "no more than an inadvertent breach" based on three things

1) the mayor's portrayal of how the interview proceeded which I certainly would not characterize as "tricky"

2) the fact that every person the writer encountered at staff at town hall "expressed concern about the quality and accuracy of the reporting from *The Independent*, and the Reporter in particular. Specifically, it was indicated that articles often misparaphrased, exaggerated or stated incorrect facts and details, and targeted certain individuals."

And that *The Independent* painted the town's staff in a "negative and inaccurate light" and "at worst the reporting was compared to a tabloid."

This too, is disappointing to hear – but frankly, not unexpected considering some of the controversies at town hall in the past five years involving the people the investigator questioned.

And 3) - the writer of the report also inferred there was something wrong with *The Independent* refusing to release my notes and audio.

The investigator was "forced to consider whether the

Reporter either intentionally or unintentionally, misquoted the Mayor” she wrote

adding it would be “difficult to conceptualize the Reporter engaging in such a serious breach of journalist ethics”

and then later “we are surprised, and forced to draw at least some adverse inference about the fact that the Reporter did not share the audio recording with us.”

Let me be clear; It is common and best practice in journalism to refuse requests for their investigative work product to police and judicial and quasi judicial bodies. It is kind of like attorney-client privilege in the legal realm or in camera items in the world of government.

I interview all kinds of people – including whistle blowers – and if I **willingly** turn over my notes to authorities, how can those sources have any confidence I will protect them when they could lose their jobs or their lives by talking to me.

The short answer is they can't.

Supreme Court cases have been fought on this issue. I would think the writer – a lawyer - might have mentioned that.

There was another way to hear this information – it is my understanding that it was the investigator's job to ask questions.

The writer of the report did not ask me what questions I asked the mayor, how long the conversation lasted, or if I had expressed any displeasure during the conversation about the Fleming report not being released. In short, she didn't tell me the mayor had blamed the media.

I'm left to conclude the investigator – during the course of the conversation - decided there must be something to the mayor's comments because a journalist failed to hand over her notes. So, the investigator stopped asking questions that might have given a more accurate picture of what actually happened.

The failure of the investigator to ask those questions puts the media on trial instead of answering this very simple question about the mayor's conduct:

When I said to the mayor on Dec 14 “I noticed in the one of the bylaws. That Jay Arns. is his title has changed to director of public services. What's that about?”

– why didn't he simply say, I can't comment on that since it is a personnel issue?

I have the privilege of reporting on all kinds of municipal councils. I usually sit quietly when

community leaders malign their local newspaper when they face difficult questions.

USUALLY.

Today; my business – which is reporting on this community and whose sole currency is the truth written as accurately as possible – has been damaged by this report because – based on the report's findings it appears - the mayor inaccurately portrayed what happened and blamed the media. And now it is in the public record.

Do I report difficult stories that politicians would rather I not – absolutely.

Do I ask tough questions – absolutely. That's the job.

Do I place the town in a negative light? Sometimes yes. That's called accountability – and that's what journalism is about and what readers expect.

And The Independent has been recognized again and again both provincially and across Canada for its high journalistic standards and the quality of its reporting.

I'd also suggest the characterization as a newspaper which only shows Petrolia in a bad light is

demonstrably false.

The Independent is the only media outlet that actually covers what happens in this town - all the summer events organized by the town staff, grants given out, grants received, honours given to long serving town staff members.

And, The Independent works to make Petrolia a better place by giving local charities a hand up with free or low cost ads. I've forgone income to work cooperatively with the town to promote local businesses in the good times and the hard times even as the newspaper industry struggles.

The information which I would call misleading and the characterization of the newspaper as "tabloid journalism" in this report damages the paper's reputation and publicly damages my integrity as a journalist in a way that I could no longer sit in the council chambers and let the "blame the media" narrative continue.

If a public report came out with Town of Petrolia maligning another local business my guess is The Town would find legal documents on their desk accusing officials of slander.

I make mistakes. I am willing to admit my mistakes. When the town calls pointing out an error – there is a correction.

I did not make a mistake here.

The mayor told the integrity commissioner he would

admit when he is wrong.

After this presentation - and after I post the audio of the interview online this evening - I hope he will be true to his word.