

Adam: Punishing this Ottawa councillor for social media remarks is wrong

Stéphanie Plante was entitled to share her views — and her strong feelings — about the contentious proposal for tent-like structures to house refugee claimants in the suburbs. Don't try to curb her freedom of speech.

By Mohammed Adam Published Aug 25, 2025



Area residents protested the proposed location of a large, tent-like structure in Kanata to house refugee claimants last November. PHOTO BY ASHLEY FRASER /Postmedia

When Ottawa council meets on Wednesday, it should reject integrity commissioner Karen Shepherd's report seeking to punish Rideau-Vanier Coun. Stephanie Plante for allegedly [breaching the city's social media code](#). If the report were accepted, it would have a chilling effect.

The report is an affront to Plante as councillor, and to her right to free speech. The idea that the councillor should be docked three days pay for standing up to those who opposed refugees in their neighbourhoods during the Sprung-structure tent debate, is offensive. That Shepherd found Plante in breach because the complainants felt "demeaned and intimidated" by her online posts is laughable.

"I accept that each of the witnesses felt, subjectively, the negative feelings described," Shepherd wrote. Huh? We are going to sanction a councillor because some people who engaged with her on social media had negative feelings? Really?

If this is now the new rule, councillors beware. You are going to be next. Say something online that someone disagrees with or claims to be hurtful or demeaning — and there are always people like that — then by her new standard, Shepherd will come after you.

Social media has become a combat zone where people go at each other on issues, and if Plante had abused, or in any way used her position as councillor to harass opponents of the Sprung structures, that would be a different story. But she did no such thing. I have read the [commissioner's report](#), and there is nothing in it that justifies punishment. What led to the "negative feelings" was nothing but a vigorous exchange of views where colourful language and emojis were used. In one exchange, one of the witnesses asked "You ok Councillor?" wondering about Plante's sanity. That was the spirit of the exchanges. The idea that Plante's comments rise to intimidation and bullying is absurd.

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At issue was the very important question of housing new refugees in the city. People who were opposed to the refugees being housed in large tents in their midst, organized fierce opposition to it, and who questioned Plante's sanity in the debate, are now crying about hurt feelings. Imagine that. What's baffling is that the integrity commissioner is siding with them.

"I accept that Respondent (Plante) did not set out to intimidate or bully members of the public ... who were opposed to the sprung structures in their neighbourhood," Shepherd wrote. "However, I find that the manner in which the Respondent largely engaged with and posted about these witnesses, which included the use of names, emojis and innuendo, was disrespectful and rose to the level of intimidation and bullying."

That conclusion is wrong at every level. If this is what the integrity commissioner has time for, perhaps we don't need one.

Plante's ward is where most of the services for the poor and downtrodden in our city are concentrated, and our suburbs want no part of it. We are supposed to be one city, but when it comes to actually helping those among us who are down on their luck and struggling with issues such as addiction, the likes of Barrhaven and Kanata don't want to know. Plante has a right to speak out. It was Barrhaven East Coun. Wilson Low, who, with a straight face, [told a city committee last year](#) that suburbs like his should be excluded from a city policy requiring shelters to be built in all but rural communities. He wanted shelters limited to downtown and urban areas. Apparently, no riff-raff near him.

So it was no surprise that when it came to temporarily housing asylum seekers, Barrhaven and Kanata residents wanted to keep them away; obviously, they don't want their pristine neighbourhoods soiled by these brown and Black people coming from God knows where. [I wrote at the time](#) that the opposition was about fear of the other, and people were giving in to their worst instincts.

Plante was right to stand up to them and Shepherd's recommendation that she be punished for doing her job is a travesty of justice that council should not countenance.