

Plenty of blame for city's rogue mayor

Voters, the political system and a weak council combined to thrust Toronto into a political crisis. Now the question is: What can be done about it?

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Rob Ford has been a rogue mayor in that he has operated outside normal or desirable controls. Who should take the blame? How can we reduce the possibility of having another rogue mayor?



Toronto Mayor Rob Ford talks to media at city hall in Toronto after being ordered out of office by a judge's ruling Monday.

Nathan Denette/The Canadian Press

Democracy is about two things: government by the people *and* the rule of law. The first is more important but the second is close behind. Mayors who flout the rules governing their positions are almost as undemocratic as mayors who defy the evident wishes of those they represent.

Toronto's eligible voters are basically responsible for the outcome of the 2010 mayoral election. If we shared Ford's politics and voted for him, we were responsible for ignoring obvious signs that he can feel he is above the law. If we were against him, we

were not strongly enough against him to prevent his election or to elect a council able enough to rein him in. If we sat on our hands, we deserve other kinds of criticism.

The system is responsible too. Municipal government in a big city is a serious business, but it has come to be regarded as a political sideshow. A rogue mayor is not the inevitable result of municipal government's inferior status, but low status makes this outcome more likely. The low status is evident

above all in the chronic underfunding of municipal services, but also in the unnecessary supervision of municipal actions by provincial governments.

This is not what the framers of our 1867 Constitution intended, or what Canadians have wanted, but it is the way things have turned out. A hundred years ago, the City of Toronto's budget was larger than the Ontario government's, and Toronto's government was incomparably more important in the life of the city. We need to restore some of that municipal eminence.

Toronto City Council must accept much of the responsibility for the mayor's behaviour since the election. He has got away with far too much. This began a few hours after he assumed office with a meeting with Gary Webster, then head of the TTC. Ford left the meeting announcing that the previous plans for light rail were dead. Webster said he would start work immediately on Ford's new subway-based plan. The mayor had no authority to change the transit plans or direct the TTC — these are council prerogatives — but councillors protested only weakly at the first of these breaches of the limits of the mayor's power and not at all at the second.

Another example of lack of adult supervision of the mayor by council was the very debate, on Feb. 7 this year, that led to Justice Charles Hackland's direction that Ford be removed from office. Ford's voting on a personal matter was unseemly and evidently illegal. Of greater concern to me was the council's decision not to endorse a recommendation of the city's integrity commissioner on the same matter.

The council appeared to regard the city's integrity commissioner as an inconvenience to be bypassed for the benefit of the mayor rather than as a major ally in the quest to protect citizens as taxpayers and users of city services.

A telling episode of council somnolence happened in August 2012 when Mayor Ford refused Toronto's support for plans to bring the 2020 Olympics here. Even in the summer doldrums, this decision was properly the council's to make, but it was 20 days before any of the 44 councillors publicly criticized the mayor's action. In another era, such a unilateral action by a mayor — almost unthinkable — would have been challenged within an hour or two and countermanded by a special meeting of council within a day or two.

What can be done? First, make Toronto council matter more by giving it more authority and more access to solid sources of funding. Then, who gets to be elected — and how they behave when elected — will matter more. Second, have the several parts of our education system pay more attention to municipal issues and processes. Curriculum builders should note that local politics can be a better route to understanding the dynamics of democracy than provincial and federal politics.

Third, think about fostering municipal parties in Toronto. They can bring their own problems — the current scandal in Montreal is in part about the funding of one of them — but, working well, political parties can bring discipline, effectiveness, integrity and dignity to big-city management. A 2014 Toronto election that pitted the Civic Party against the Ford Nation could be a memorable event.

Richard Gilbert was a Toronto councillor from 1976 to 1991.