

2010 MUNICIPAL ELECTION ANALYSIS

Thursday, November 4, 2010

The stunning victory of millionaire councillor Rob Ford in the race for Mayor of Toronto confounded most seasoned election observers. His simple, focused message worked for more than just traditional conservatives – it hit home with many union members, low-income workers, newcomers, and tenants as well. The fact that the wave of discontent found support among half the voters demands a thorough analysis of the factors that led to Ford's victory.

Over the last entire term, the Miller government was dogged by a relentless attack in the media over all kinds of issues. Some of those criticisms were valid, but in many cases, it was attacked for exercising real leadership on the environmental or social equity. Often it was because the City was investing in public services, carrying out the first major transit expansion in a generation, or supporting good jobs through local procurement. But Miller's decision to provoke a strike last summer shook his own base and emboldened the right.

As well, a serious rift developed over the refusal of David Miller to fully embrace Bay Street's privatization agenda. The corporate response was distilled into the Board of Trade's declaration that there was a structural financial crisis at the city that could only be solved by cracking down on labour costs. The Board of Trade built an entire election program around the assertion that Toronto had a spending problem, not a revenue problem – ignoring the universally recognized burden of provincial downloading. This became a theme of all mayoralty candidates except Joe Pantalone.

Throughout the spring and summer, Labour Council warned of a "whiff of Common Sense Revolution in the air". Following any economic downturn, there is fertile ground for right-wing populism to seize on the anger of people who are having a hard time getting by. Backlash politics always identifies some scapegoat, whether it be welfare recipients by Mike Harris or the "elites" riding the gravy train in Obama's White House or David Miller's city hall. The great irony of backlash politics is that working people often end up voting for politicians who promise tax cuts and scrapping vital programs that benefit other working people.

But we cannot ignore the local factors that fuelled alienation. Some of the actions of the Miller regime suggested that City Hall felt it was smarter than ordinary people, as when policies on bike lanes, revenue tools, or transit issues were imposed without respectful consultation. A sense of entitlement was reflected in paying Councillor's legal bills or throwing farewell galas. The city and transit strikes alienated a wide section of the public who blamed all parties for the disruption in their lives. And for Torontonians who are victims of the jobless economic recovery, even the \$60 vehicle registration tax seemed unfair.

The election campaign itself was a ten month roller coaster ride, with mayoralty candidates stepping in and out of the race, Liberals sounding like Tories, and a confused public finding only one message compelling – the repeated phrase "end the gravy train". The true facts were overwhelmed by a whipped up fury about alleged waste and fat cats that included city workers. The mainstream media bears immense responsibility for setting this climate of anger, as their incessant attacks on City Hall replicated the treatment of the Bob Rae government in its final years. By the time they realized that Rob Ford alone was riding their wave of discontent, it was too late to re-direct the momentum towards George Smitherman.

- 2 -

Smitherman started off by attacking the Miller record, then spent months ricocheting all over the political map. He failed to connect with much of the traditional Liberal base, particularly in the suburbs and among blue-collar workers. The anti-gay sentiment was a factor in his loss, but so was the reaction to his downtowner image and the Queen's Park connection. Joe Pantalone's campaign was late getting started, and never really took off in spite of labour and NDP support. He was unfairly tarred by the media as being simply an apologist for the current regime, rather than the only candidate who spoke up to defend public services and good jobs. And when Rossi and Thompson finally dropped out, much of their vote went straight to Ford.

The labour movement was engaged in a variety of ways throughout the year. In the spring, the Public Services for All campaign was launched as a partnership with public sector unions and the Good Jobs for All coalition. It highlighted four key themes: Our City Not For Sale, Good Transit for All, Good Jobs for All and It Takes a City to Raise a Child. Public meetings were held in the suburbs, and flyers widely distributed. The ATU invested significantly in the Public Transit Coalition, which produced newspaper and TV ads to warn of the danger of transit privatization.

On the education field, the Campaign for Public Education, Labour Council and education affiliates worked to support school trustee candidates. The Toronto District School Board gained three new progressive voices (Glover, Kaplan and Smith), and one very right wing incumbent Trustee, Scott Harrison from Scarborough, was defeated. Despite an unprecedented interference in the elections by the Archdiocese of Toronto, most of the Toronto Catholic District School Board Trustees were returned. Unfortunately, Catherine Leblanc Miller, former chair and principled opponent of cutting jobs and services to children, was defeated.

The Labour Council and affiliates undertook a significant mobilization of activists to help on the campaigns of endorsed candidates, helping to distribute thousands of leaflets, staffing phone banks and putting up signs across the city. In the late summer, labour and community groups came together to form the OneToronto campaign, to counter the negativity and politics of division that were dominating the election environment. Involving a wide range of civil society including students and the arts community, OneToronto was too late into the game to change the political climate, but will continue as a united voice for a decent city in the future.

It is important to note that the numbers on City Council itself did not shift dramatically. Ford does not have a clear majority government, and will have to recruit centrist councillors to implement his plans. Labour and social justice movements must educate their members and build solid resistance to ensure that the Tories are unable to translate the Ford victory into provincial and federal majority governments. Many of our core beliefs may be challenged over the next four years – strong public services, fair wage policy, labour standards, and services to marginalized and racialized communities.

It will be four hard years of struggle and resistance.