

Lessons in Toronto

What the Rob Ford victory says

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When Rob Ford won a massive victory in Toronto, on October 25th -- taking 47 percent of the votes -- I was reminded of Noam Chomsky's book, "Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media". Here you had a classic case of big media (The Toronto Star) and big government (the Ontario Liberal Party) furiously campaigning for the Liberal mayoralty candidate, former Ontario cabinet minister George Smitherman. If you believe the Chomsky view of the world, Smitherman should have won easily given that the establishment, corporations, opinion makers and "intellectual elites" were behind him. There was even a desperate "anyone but Ford" campaign in the final weeks of the race.

But it was not to be as the deeply right-of-centre candidate cleaned up with almost 100,000 votes more than Smitherman. The race saw a record number of voters (52.6 percent) go to the polls; historically high for a municipal election where fewer than 40 percent of eligible voters usually turn up. Even the pollsters looked bad, with most predicting a much closer race than the landslide seen on election night. Occasionally democracy has a way of humbling "deep thinkers". And don't think there isn't a good dose of *schadenfreude* in the rest of country regarding Ford's victory.

Toronto's new mayor is the antithesis of Toronto's outgoing mayor, David Miller, an Ivy League-educated sophisticate who embodies the very nature of an elite progressive, modern public official. Rather than run on a series of cultural or environmental issues, Ford had one cause: respect for the taxpayer.

How could Canada's most liberal big city elect the most right wing of candidates? Let me restate that in terms that would be understood by Ford's opponents; how could sophisticated Toronto elect this gaffe-prone, overweight, small-time politician who looks "better suited to running a car dealership in Okotoks, Alberta" than in leading Toronto, as one Globe and Mail writer put it.

One far-fetched idea is that Ford is simply a Canadian version of a Tea Party populist. What has been going on south of the border, some have suggested, has allegedly contaminated Canada's political scene. That was the spin offered by Toronto NDP MP Olivia Chow, who said -- *a la* Obama -- that this is what happens when fear trumps hope.

Or was this simply an anti-urban vote by envious suburbs that weren't doing as well economically

as downtown Toronto? It was a way to stick it to the elites living in Rosedale, Forest Hill and the Annex. (Oddly, no one makes the argument that urbanites vote against the interests of suburbanites.) There's no question that Ford, who won 31 of the Greater Toronto Area's 44 wards, did well in the suburbs and not so well in downtown old Toronto. But even in the 13 downtown wards carried by Smitherman, Ford didn't do too badly, taking over 30 percent of votes in some wards. In other words, the split between suburbia and downtown Toronto doesn't tell the whole story. If suburbanites so envy downtown, how can one explain Miller's success in the GTA's blue-collar areas in 2006?

Others have consoled themselves with the assertion that it wasn't so much that Ford won, but that others lost because they ran poor campaigns. Ryerson University professor and veteran urban specialist Myer Siemiatycki makes the argument that Smitherman allowed Ford to set the agenda early in the race and then failed to set himself apart afterwards. Isn't that always the case with losing candidates? A smarter strategy would have won the day. But this argument makes little sense. All the bad news that came out about Ford's personal life during the campaign -- his DUI troubles in Florida and various domestic problems -- only succeeded in making him more popular. Even his comments that Toronto can't afford more immigrants, comments that led to charges of racism by his opponents, failed to make a dent in his popularity.

What really happened?

If these reasons don't go a long way to explaining the most incredible municipal election in Toronto's modern history, then what actually happened on October 25? To answer that question we have to look at David Miller's tenure of mayor over the last seven years.

In no particular order, here is what I think led to Rob Ford's victory. To begin, Miller allowed academically fashionable ideas of how to run a city and create wealth -- such as the notions of Richard Florida, an American scholar and

popular author at the University of Toronto -- to dominate his thinking. Florida believes cities create wealth by attracting, what he calls, the "creative class". Attract these highly educated workers and they will inevitably help the economy grow. Without them you'll just end up like Buffalo, New York, instead of San Francisco.

Implicit in this view is the conviction that talented individuals are attracted to a city that stress modern, urban living with more restaurants, and concert halls. In other words, culture is the key to wealth creation and prosperity. If this creative class want all the cultural accoutrements, build them -- usually at taxpayer expense -- and they will come. From that perspective, the only initiatives coming out of City Hall during the reign of Mayor Miller were programs that favoured the environment over business, and bike lanes over traffic congestion. What is one to make of a city where the bike lobby has more power than the infinitely greater number of car and truck drivers?

And with all the talk about improving public transit, Torontonians have seen little improvement. As candidate Rocco Rossi said during the campaign, Toronto has the world's finest 1970s public transit system. Further, after all these years, Toronto has yet to build a rail link between its downtown and the nation's busiest airport. But I sense that keeping automobile traffic in a state of perpetual confusion, with a maddening traffic light system that frustrates drivers, is simply a way to force people to use an outdated public transit system. In the end, such policy preferences only pushed people who had few options other than their cars to get to work, to vote for a candidate who sympathized with their problems.

If Miller will be remembered for anything, it will be for rising property taxes and the very unpopular annual vehicle registration fee of \$60 and the hefty land-transfer tax. The latter adds thousands of dollars to the cost of buying a house. Attack homeowners' equity value and you're sure to pay a political price. Even left-leaning homeowners want top market value for

their homes. Ford promised to eliminate both if elected and reaped the benefits at the polls.

Miller's choice to replace him was Deputy Mayor Joe Pantalone, a long-time NDPer with a Panglossian view of municipal politics; Toronto is the best of all possible worlds. He hardly spoke of crime, rising taxes, snarled traffic or crumbling roads. His reputation was built on planting trees and promoting roof gardens. That's how one sees the world if you live in old, urban, rich Toronto. Even with Miller's endorsement, Pantalone, a likeable and popular councillor, didn't manage to carry a single riding in the city.

Another factor was the 2009 garbage strike that left a strong stench that lasted right into the election. Aside from driving most citizens around the bend with frustration, the strike reminded many of how City Hall was captured by inside workers and a growing bureaucracy that seemed immune to a slowing economy. Wages and salaries at City Hall have been increasing at a rate of 6 percent annually since 2000, while workers on the outside in the private sector struggled with a slowing economy and an unemployment rate of over 8 percent.

Who speaks for New Immigrants?

One of the most surprising outcomes of the election is the strong support Ford received from Torontonians born outside Canada. After all the accusations of racism, he won over 50 percent of their votes. While the left talks about "inclusiveness" and "diversity", immigrants worry about the same things everyone else does; jobs, education for their children and safe communities. What is little appreciated is that the ethnic community is essentially a socially conservative community, sharing few of the permissive attitudes of progressives. You can be certain they didn't choose Toronto for its bike lanes.

Liberals and the left have always patronized new immigrants and simply assumed they could count on their support come election time. That era has passed, if it ever existed.

Lessons

If Chomsky were right, George Smitherman should be mayor of Toronto. One lesson from this election has little to do with Chomsky's theories, or the ideas of trendy urban scholars who themselves have little experience in running cities. In any case, they never have to answer to voters for their ideas. This election was about politicians who understand the fundamentals of running a city. That means keeping the infrastructure in good running order such as roads, sewers, efficient garbage collection, good schools, a safe community, a balanced budget and taxes that don't discourage jobs.

Calgary which had its own election October 18, elected its first Muslim mayor Naheed Nenshi. But he wasn't elected on esoteric nouveau urban ideas, but on the promise of improving public infrastructure, snow removal, and less government red tape; all nut and bolt issues. These are the factors that attract workers that create real wealth. And don't assume new Canadians are any less interested in these fundamentals. If municipal governments get captured by inside unionized workers and programs that are peripheral to running a city, voters will eventually have their say.

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