

Will Communists on Council Unite?

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By the definition of some at City Council, I am a Communist.

While I believe that the City is difficult financial circumstances, I believe that closing library branches is neither desirable, nor to be considered unless absolutely necessary.

I do believe that parts of the City's organization were treated far too leniently. Yet we should not correct this problem by replacing one area of protected turf with another. If we are to obtain additional efficiencies from the City's inside and waste collection workers, we also need to address issues in the police and fire fighters' collective agreements.

I believe that while too much debt squeezes out worthwhile projects, borrowing is sensible for funding large projects. I do not believe in using debt payments to fill operating budget holes.

I believe that residents look to municipal government for basic property services such as roads, sewers and utilities. As well, emergency and transit services are considered priorities. But people also rely on cities for their quality of life, in terms that are measured by cultural venues and social support services.

I believe that every part of the city needs to shoulder part of the civic tax burden. On the other hand, each part must be able to achieve some of its goals, even if they are particular to a community. Perhaps that means windrow clearing in the suburbs and bike lanes downtown.

I believe that it is necessary to be firm as the City sets expectations and budgets. Giving in to every demand without setting priorities will only store up trouble. But it is not necessary to be disrespectful, dismissive or divisive.

I guess these beliefs make me a Communist.

The good news is that I expect that the majority of Councillors and residents are Communists too.

Since amalgamation most members of Council have tried to reach consensus along the lines above. While it was human nature to try to push the limits in one direction or another, majorities held the centre. As a result Council delivered a city that has enviable standards, but it backed away from making difficult financial decisions.

The current Administration has come to office with unprecedented strength. Record numbers of voters supported vigorous change, especially in what electors believed to be a sense of entitlement by City workers.

The Mayor has not disabused the public of their perception. He has offered City workers a buyout package, threatened layoffs, supported a lock out and is preparing for a strike.

These positions give the clear message that he is prepared to seek Council approval to make the municipal work force more efficient. It is a position consistent with his mandate. Such basic changes are fundamental for the City's long term viability.

But tough measures do not mean chaos. The weakness in the Mayor's position is that there is no sense of an overall plan. Random musings have not been tempered. Provoking anxiety without thought does more than get time on the talk shows. It causes concern among the Mayor's colleagues at Council. Unless the Administration is careful, public concern may impact enough of those 45 votes necessary to approve measures at Council.

Over the years Council has steered a middle course. In the Lastman years, it prevented what it thought were excesses in privatization. In the Miller years, it left unfunded many well-intentioned initiatives.

In the Ford years, I expect the centrists on Council - Communists, if you wish - will continue their tradition. For Council to approve radical change, both the public and Council will need to be assured that measures before it are consistent with the Mayor's mandate, and will create a better City. There is still a long way to go.

We will see whether the Communists on Council unite.