

Change critical for Rob Ford in coming year

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It has been quite a year at City Hall.

It was a year that saw repeal of the vehicle tax and a decision to outsource waste collection. The year saw transit declared as an essential service, and firing the Board and President of Toronto's housing authority.

Whether you approve or not, these decisions are obvious markers that the new Administration has changed governance at City Hall.

At the same time, it was the year that demonstrated limits to the Mayor's power. While few disagreed with getting an outside review of City's services, the final votes showed that Council had no appetite for massive change. As the debate concluded, final savings were meagre: about \$28m within the context of a \$9b budget.

Our Chief Magistrate continues with behaviour that may have served him well as a Councillor, but is politically costly as a Mayor. He refuses to talk to the City's largest media outlet, and to participate in one of its largest celebrations. He makes house calls to constituents yet must be prodded to disclose the developers he meets.

What can be made of these contradictions?

It's an old political saying that an Administration's first term is about making change. The second term is about cementing that change for the future.

Whether through poor tactics or indiscipline, it looks as if the Ford Administration may be weakening itself to the point where it no longer can carry out its mandate. When that happens, electors start asking basic questions about why they ought to continue their support.

To go back to the beginning, Mayor Ford won a strong mandate for a smaller, more efficient City government. The size of his majority, the number of new Councillors and the ability to make decisions quickly gave him early victories.

But each of those factors has turned against him. Although small polls are unreliable, enough information exists to conclude that Mayor has much less popularity than at election day. Constituents impacted by the threat of cuts have emboldened Councillors to vote against the Mayor. And the Mayor continues to weaken his position by creating uncertainty. For example, his earlier tax decisions were complete surprises, and recently he has speculated on cutting the land transfer tax.

As a result, the Mayor risks finding himself isolated. If he loses the ability to carry key measures, there is a greater risk of being a one term mayor. Should the reaction to his term be sufficiently negative, his successor will campaign on a platform of undoing the few measures that passed.

At this stage, his downward slope is reversible. The Mayor can begin by not looking for unnecessary trouble. He can consider conforming to basic rules on disclosure and properly paying expenses. Next he can make efforts not to offend. Both allies and the wider public would appreciate it if he would consult his team before making announcements and reach out to those who do not support his agenda.

Next the Mayor needs to decide what issues require political investment. Equally importantly he needs to decide which do not. Lobbying and losing the symbolic shark fin ban by 38 votes to 4 was completely unnecessary. On the other hand, it is hard to see how losing important decisions on the Waterfront bolstered the Mayor's credibility. Sprung upon an unsuspecting Council, a new vision seemed to be complete, down to the stores in the malls and Ferris wheel. Not even the Mayor's allies had enough commitment to support the new concept.

On the horizon are issues that will define the Ford Administration. These will need support from the Mayor's allies plus those less committed to his program. The challenges of making substantial changes in labour relations will be coming early in the new year. Approving sources of funding for the Sheppard subway requires approval later in the term.

Acting from conviction without fear of negative consequences has put Rob Ford in the Mayor's chair. As the last year progressed, that behavior has not provided him with results. In the future, keeping the same pattern puts his Administration and legacy at risk.

He himself needs to change. Not into a different person, but in order succeed in his own mandate.