

Rob Ford's war on waste

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Love him or hate him — there doesn't seem to be middle ground — Rob Ford has defined this mayoral election campaign. Originally considered a one-dimensional figure railing against spending at city hall, Ford's front-runner status has many voters now trying to understand his personality to see if he merits support.

Without a doubt, Ford's focus on finding waste has been a theme throughout his time on council. His reputation and work ethic on the subject are well-earned. Almost every budget season he goes through the city's ledgers looking for savings.

If any other councillor found savings, they would typically be brought to budget committee and offered in exchange for funding one of that councillor's priorities. As well, there would be quiet advocacy among colleagues to build support for the idea.

Such a process had no appeal for Rob Ford. He went directly to council with his suggestions. His research was impressive, as was the sheer number of resolutions (well over 200 in his second term).

But without working to get any support for his ideas, the results were unsurprising. Proposals as varied as stopping city hall's plant watering service, eliminating in-house magazines, and restricting free TTC passes to only veterans and the blind all failed.

Just one of his budget resolutions passed, prohibiting alcohol from being charged to councillors' budgets. The total savings were estimated at \$6,900. If his goal was to change policy, there was little to show for it.

Yet these quixotic missions burnished his credentials.

By revelling in measures that had no chance of success, he let everyone know that he was prepared to stand by himself. Lest the message not be clear, he alienated many colleagues by calling one councillor "a waste of skin" and another a "Gino-boy."

Conservative-minded councillors reached out to him a number of times, without success. He said he valued his independence.

From city budgets, Ford turned his attention to councillors' discretionary expenses.

Established to help councillors provide service, administrative staff reimbursed invoices without any real ability to refuse. Once Ford started asking for details, staff warned the mayor's office and councillors that their expenses were being reviewed. Rather than tighten spending rules, the investigation was made difficult.

Ford responded by issuing requests through the Freedom of Information Act and then posted the results on his website. Soon the media were full of revelations such as an office redecoration, a bunny suit, espresso machine and unjustifiable taxi rides paid out of public accounts. Belatedly, policies were changed.

It did not take long for council to close ranks. Even on the promise of best behaviour, begging almost, Ford was refused membership on the committees he wanted. He was mercilessly heckled and sworn at. Councillors switched seats so as not to sit beside him. Council as well as individual members attacked him through the integrity commissioner. In his second term almost every female councillor objected to his behaviour.

Without the wish, or perhaps ability, to compromise at city hall, Ford put his energy into constituency work. Typically, a constituency office receives 30 calls weekly for extra service such as traffic calming, or to launch a property standards complaint, or to ask for additional waste pickup. Usually service requests are received by the councillor's office and delegated to city staff.

Very quickly, councillors were aware something different was happening. First came news from city management about Ford's insistence for city staff attendance on site to respond personally to constituents' needs. It did not take long for residents dissatisfied with either the service or answer from their own councillor to begin calling Ford.

With no alliances to lose, and grateful electors to gain, Ford happily filled the void. Soon councillors were finding out from residents that Ford was performing constituency work in their wards. Instead of addressing reasons for dissatisfaction among residents, councillors approved a new policy limiting city service.

Is he repentant? Absolutely not. As Ford states on his city [web page](#), "If you need assistance with a city issue, please do not hesitate to contact him or his office." His fan base is constrained only by his ability to return calls.

Particularly at election time it is usual to look for underlying motivation. In this case, Rob Ford the candidate is the same person councillors have known for a decade. He offers genuineness without pretension or gloss. Whether the characteristics he has revealed are those voters want in a mayor is a question each must decide for himself.

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