

Time to Assess Toronto's Mayor Miller

Yen Chu

The campaign for Toronto's mayor is underway with this year's municipal election set for November 13th. In the 2003 election, David Miller was the underdog councillor championed by many on the left. This time around, Miller is the mayoral incumbent, with a track record that has left some of his leftist supporters disappointed and others on the left not surprised. Miller's supporters saw his victory as hope for change. Other leftists, however, have always believed that electoral politics is an ineffective vehicle for social change. Furthermore, municipal politics itself has its limitations, as it is often affected by and dependent upon provincial and federal decisions and funding, as well as global events and market fluctuations. But even based on the power and influence that mayors do have, Miller's falls short as a reformer.

Miller's predecessor, Mel Lastman, was a brash conservative who was unapologetic in his aggressive denunciations of both unions and the homeless and in his racism (Lastman once told a reporter that he was afraid of going to Kenya because he worried that he would be eaten by the 'natives'). This rhetoric was matched by equally harmful policies. Lastman pushed for the Safe Streets Act, which gave the police the authority to target the homeless and fine or arrest them for panhandling near bus stops or bank machines. He had a law and order agenda and refused to acknowledge that racial profiling existed on the police force. While sidelining poor communities, Lastman was a strong advocate of development. In his last term, his administration was in the midst of finalizing a deal to construct a bridge from downtown to the island airport. The city was also embroiled in a corruption scandal that Lastman tried to keep behind closed doors.

Miller's campaign platform rested on the promise to scrap the island airport bridge and to sweep out corruption at city hall. The image of the broom came to symbolize Miller's promise to clean up city hall as well as the city. After his victory, Miller succeeded in scrapping the deal to construct the bridge. Some on the left saw the issue of the bridge as a polarisation between those who cared about strong neighbourhood with good environments to those who only wanted to advance the interest of businesses at the expense of the environment and the community. For them Miller belonged to the former.

Others on the left remembered Miller's progressive track record on social issues as a city councillor such as his outspoken criticisms of the police. In 2000, the Toronto Police Association printed Miller's home phone number in newspaper ads in retaliation for his criticisms of the police's Operation True Blue telemarketing campaign, which would raise funds to help the police target their critics. In the previous year, the Police Association revealed that they hired private detectives to investigate municipal politicians who were critical of the police. Miller was

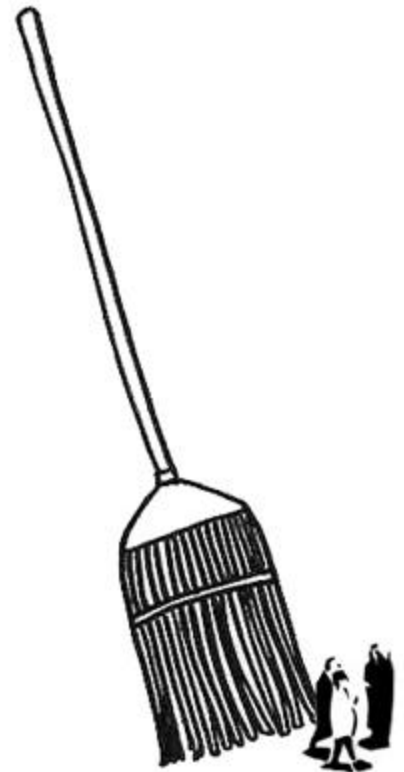
also critical of the Mike Harris government and their plans to fingerprint people on social assistance. But it was a different story once Miller became mayor.

MILLER IN POWER

Miller put his broom to work and established the Clean and Beautiful City Initiative, which involved planting flowers along University Ave and adding more street sweepers to clean the city. However, for anti-poverty groups like the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) and the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, Miller's broom and Clean and Beautiful City Initiative are more than just about sweeping the garbage off the streets: they also included aspects of social cleansing. Just like Lastman, Miller does not want visible displays of poverty on Toronto streets. He and city council approved a ban on homeless people from sleeping at City Hall. In defending his action Miller said public space should not be turned into private space, implying that the homeless were turning City Hall into their private space. It seemed lost on Miller that homeless people sleep on public streets and spaces because they cannot afford private spaces. Also, public space is free and shared by everyone, while private space is controlled and policed. The homeless sleep at city hall at night when there is hardly anyone around. Nor do they prevent anyone from using the space if they had chosen to do so.

The further policing of public space by the city includes city workers fining the homeless who are found sleeping in parks with charges of camping in park without permit. The city is also moving to remove homeless people who live under the bridges of the Gardiner Expressway.

However, Miller has claimed that his Streets to Home initiative have found homes for about 500 homeless people. In April, Miller commissioned a survey on the homeless in order to do a needs-assessment. The



survey has not resulted in much, except now the city has passed a motion to do research into establishing a law to ban panhandling. The limits of both the initiative and the survey have been widely criticised by housing advocates as yet another series of policy failures.

This social cleansing is paralleled by the gentrification and 'condo-ification' happening throughout the city's core, where the professional middle-class has resettled in droves and pushed the working class to the margins. Walking through Toronto's Queen Street district west of Spadina, used bookstores, thrift shops, greasy spoons, used appliances stores, modest restaurant and bars are being replaced by more upscale businesses such as fancy restaurants that sell appetizers for \$15, hip bars crammed with the very fashionable and designer hotels.

The wealth being generated by the financial and speculative industries now dominating the Toronto economy, however, have neither trickled down in the urban core, nor been redistributed throughout other parts of the city. Rather, in the city's poorer neighbourhoods residents face high unemployment, poor housing, lack of services, and inadequate public transit. The increasing gun violence in the city can be attributed to this social deterioration. Much of this can be blamed on the federal government for toughening employment insurance eligibility and benefits, the Harris government for cutting social assistance and downloading social programs, and the federal and provincial Liberals for failing to restore those cuts. Although, the Miller administration has set-up programs such as training schemes as preventive measures (which reports suggest have been dismally taken up by employers), he also boasts of having the largest budget increase for the city's police force. Adding more police officers to neighbourhoods where residents are mistrustful of the police will not solve the problems. The solution starts with addressing social, economic and racial disparities.

If it is true that all levels of government are responsible for addressing social problems, it is nonetheless telling that a cash-strapped city can manage to find more money for the police, but it is unable to hire more building inspectors to crack down on slumlords. If the city cares about safety, then they must also ensure that tenants live in safe housing. Miller and the city has made tiniest possible step towards this by providing a website with information on apartment standards based on status of inspections and orders to comply. But this, along with some construction of affordable housing, is not enough to alleviate the cities housing

crisis. Housing activists have proposed quite feasible reforms that include expropriating property from landlords who fail to maintain their property to standard and the conversion of all vacant property to affordable housing.

Torontonians like to see their city as progressive. But this is more myth than fact. Some American

cities have reforms that have gone further than Toronto and Miller's policies. For instance, in several U.S. cities new developments must include a certain percentage of affordable housing. Certainly, this should not be a substitute for public housing, but it at least provides for some new affordable housing for the working-class in the city core. Also, many cities south of the border have implemented a 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' policy, which means that city workers will not ask for immigration status or share the information with federal agencies. Miller has expressed support for such a policy, but so far the city has not moved to fully implement this.

While some of his supporters may or may not be critical of his social policies, they have been critical of him on issues of governance and development. In an effort to make government more accountable and responsive to residents, Miller held a participatory budget town-hall style meeting. Yet Miller has been pushing for the new Toronto Act, which will include more executive power for the mayor and move budget decisions away from city council. CUPE, the municipal workers union, is working with other community groups to oppose this undemocratic provision for concentrating power to the mayor's office. Miller has also been criticized for supporting the \$255 million Front Street Extension, which will widen the roads near the lake, making the waterfront even less accessible.

If Miller has one thing going for him, it has been his commitment to keeping city services public. This has been the basis of support from some union locals, including those within OPSEU and CUPE. Many are also worried about his opponent Jane Pitfield, a conservative who has said that the city does not need unions and who spearheaded the campaign to ban panhandling. This is an important concern as the most reactionary forces in the city are still looking for a champion – as they had in the last mayoralty election in John Tory and in Mayor Lastman – to push city politics even more pro-business and neoliberal.

ONE MORE TIME: ELECTION 2006

At the end of the day, municipal politics is posing a recurrent dilemma for the left and social justice. As with many social democratic policies, Miller's commitment on public service could be here today, but gone tomorrow. After all, Miller was originally opposed to the Front Street Extension. There are additional reasons to raise concerns: many of Miller's advisors are Tories, as he has sought to build an encompassing coalition that embraces the Toronto business agendas as well; he has taken a strong stance against the TTC union in their efforts to protect jobs; and he shockingly participated in the spring Walk for Israel march in the middle of the crisis in Gaza.

The fight against social marginalization and for local democracy does not start or end at the ballot box. Even basic reforms, such as better housing, are not achieved from the goodness of a politician's heart – it comes from community pressure, mobilization and activism. This has proven the case election after election. **R**

Yen Chu lives in Toronto.

