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Miller's power grab is dangerous

May 01, 2008

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Citizens elect a mayor and a council to provide oversight to the civic bureaucracy, cut red tape and protect minority interest, even as they preserve the civic good.

The mayor isn't king; he or she is a first among equals.

The mayor does not have the untrammelled right to hire and fire the civil service. But few city managers can function without the mayor's blessing and support.

The mayor isn't a power source, able to ignore or subvert the will of council. But he or she is the leader, walking a delicate balance.

And yet, in the issue of declaring the TTC an essential service – and a growing list of other matters at city hall – the mayor of Toronto seeks to overstep his traditional authority in subtle but significant ways.

The average Joe doesn't much care or take notice. He should. It's a whittling away of democracy, an erosion of processes that Mayor David Miller once professed to hold dear.

Look at the most contentious issues at Toronto city hall over the last 12 years – market value reassessment, dumping garbage in the Adams Mine in Kirkland Lake, or the imposition of a land transfer tax last fall – and the outcome is always better because of the open process that allows, in fact depends on, dissent.

That will change soon in Toronto, if Miller has his way. And it will be for the worse, even though most of us won't clue to it. In fact, Miller would implement the changes without debating them at council. He just plans to go to Queen's Park and get the new powers from his friend, Premier Dalton McGuinty.

Miller, the great man of the people, the one who ran on a platform of open government and transparency, has chosen to skirt such a process and embark on a political coup. He aims to politicize the bureaucracy under the guise of accountability. He plans to bolster his political hold on council by enshrining the right to hold secret meetings with his political allies on the powerful executive committee, which he unilaterally appoints and fires. And he wants it done without the input or vote of council.

"I don't want council to get bogged down in debates about governance," he said yesterday, with a straight face. That's right up there with Kim Campbell's retort that election time is no time for serious debate about public policy.

A few short years ago, most city hall observers would've concluded that any fears about the misuse of power rests not with the current mayor but with some future iron-fisted tyrant who might rise up and smash what we've built here. Miller, we thought, would be a benevolent dictator.

That view is not universally held anymore. And for good reason.

Two years ago, Councillor Cesar Palacio asked council to help make the TTC an essential service. Council sent it to the mayor-controlled executive committee where it languished until January 2007. Then it was buried with a procedural designation, "note and file."

Of course, now the issue is hot. Prescient Palacio had every right to say to council this week, "I told you so," and demand the matter be debated. But the mayor, through patronage appointments, controls 13 votes on the executive as well as several others through appointments to committees.

It's virtually impossible to get the two-thirds majority vote to overcome the mayor's obstructive designs. All Palacio was able to extract was a promise that this time Miller will not hide the proposal.

That's not the Toronto we've come to know. It's a future Toronto city council should debate.

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