

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford says city “booming” despite record unemployment

Carl Bronski
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Toronto Mayor Rob Ford called a news conference last week in his ongoing quest to rehabilitate his tattered image as he heads into an election year. At the beginning of the year, Ford was the first off the mark to register his candidacy for next October’s mayoralty election, declaring himself “the best mayor that this city has ever had.”

Ford hopes that he will be able to use the intervening eight months to push to the background last year’s sordid spectacle of drug and alcohol abuse, criminal associations, habitual lying and outright buffoonery that saw him stripped of much of his executive authority by city council and his outlandish antics splattered across the television screens and front pages of the world’s media outlets.

At his recent press conference, the ever-mendacious Ford boasted that “I have made job creation and economic growth a key pillar of my administration, and I have fulfilled exactly what I said I was going to do...Toronto is booming today. We’re a global powerhouse.”

This news would certainly come as a surprise to the hundreds of thousands of city residents who languish in poverty and unemployment. At 10.1 percent, Toronto currently has the second highest jobless rate among the country’s municipalities. Unemployment amongst the city’s youth is at 20 percent and rising. Those who still have jobs have had to contend with major rent, electricity and food price increase, while wages have stagnated and public services have been cut.

Nearly a quarter of Toronto’s 2,750,000 residents live below the poverty line. Ford’s constituency in Etobicoke North—which he represented as a city councilor for ten years prior to his 2010 victory in the mayor’s race—has the highest rate of both child and overall poverty in the city.

Ford’s response has been to slash social spending, attack city workers and privatize garbage pick-up—all with the support of the city council.

To give Ford his due, Toronto is certainly booming for his real constituency—the rich and super-rich. The city, Canada’s banking centre and home to many of the head offices of the country’s top corporations, has the highest income inequality quotient for any Canadian municipality. Only the petro-dollar fuelled city of Calgary is home to a higher concentration of “one-percenters”—that is, the super-rich occupying the very top

income percentile.

The growing gap between rich and poor is further illustrated by the rapid disappearance of “middle-class” neighbourhoods in Toronto. If trends continue, it is estimated that within a decade only one in five of the city’s neighbourhoods will be home to “average wage earners.”

Himself a “silver-spoon” millionaire who bragged on a sports phone-in show last week that his family owns six condominiums in Florida (along with factories in Toronto and Chicago), Ford has placed relatively well in recent early polling on possible outcomes for the October mayoral election. Most candidates have yet to formally file their candidacy papers, but it is expected that some high-profile political figures will soon enter the contest. One poll showed that in a hypothetical race between Ford, his disapproving political rivals on the political right—John Tory, Karen Stintz and David Socknaki—and New Democratic Party stalwart Olivia Chow, Ford would edge out Chow by a 35 to 30 percent margin. How is this to be explained?

In an interview with Fox News at the height of the press frenzy over the mayor’s crack-smoking scandal last autumn, millionaire factory-owner and budget-slasher Ford, a man seemingly without shame, put down his electoral strategy to a simple formula. “There’s more poor people in this country than there are rich, and I stick up for the poor people,” he said.

Demagogy? Poppycock? Certainly. But there is more to it than that.

Ford’s unlikely political career has been compared to that of former US 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Widely condemned in mainstream political circles as an ill-informed, incompetent clown, Ford mobilized support on the basis of a right-wing populist campaign that portrayed him as the champion of the “ordinary Joe” fighting the arrogant, trendy downtown political elites who drain away “our” tax dollars in wasteful spending.

In this, Ford was abetted by Toronto’s previous mayor, the urbane, NDP- and trade union-backed David Miller. Miller presided over a dramatic infusion of wealth to the city’s financial elite through a series of generous property tax breaks, grants, subsidies and grossly undervalued business land assessments handed over to big commercial developers. In

2009, Miller forced a concessions-laden contract on 30,000 striking city workers. None of the city's nominally progressive councilors raised a voice to defend the workers, whom the press vilified as "selfish" for fighting to safeguard their modest salaries and benefits. Only months before the election, Miller and his left-leaning council further alienated whole swathes of the local population when they voted unanimously to wholeheartedly commend the police for their brutal, four-day assault on thousands of demonstrators and by-standers during the G-20 summit in the city.

Campaigning in the 2010 election, Ford harnessed widespread popular anger against declining living standards by promising to lower taxes, while shamelessly lying that any cuts would only affect the "grave train" on which city employees reputedly gorged. He was elected by only a quarter of total eligible voters.

When significant opposition to Ford's rightwing agenda emerged in the fall of 2011, the unions and NDP worked to suppress it, limiting it to impotent protests, then imposed unprecedented concession contracts on city workers. For all their declamations against Ford, the unions and NDP agree that working people must pay for the capitalist crisis through wage and public service cuts. With the unions' full support, the NDP has propped up a minority Ontario Liberal government that has imposed social spending cuts even larger than those imposed by the Thatcherite Ontario Conservative government of Mike Harris in the late 1990s.

Over the years Ford has buttressed his blunt anti-tax and pro-law-and-order nostrums with statements attacking immigrants, gays, the homeless and unionized city workers. In the last election he gained the editorial support of three out of four of Toronto's main daily newspapers. However, at the height of the crack cocaine scandal all four papers called for his resignation, his previous editorial supporters now fearing that their right-wing agenda would be stalled by his tainted leadership and his personal confrontations with the police chief.

Toronto's elite has long been aware of Ford's ignorant and reactionary views and of his cavalier and petulant behaviour—behaviour that had alienated him from much of the right-wing faction at city hall during his ten years as a city councilor. But determined to push politics sharply to the right, the elite promoted Ford, seeking to use him to build a popular constituency for a socially-regressive agenda aimed at redistributing wealth to the most privileged sections of Toronto's population through tax and social spending cuts.

Ford's resiliency—or, perhaps more accurately, stubbornness—has caused considerable consternation with broad sections of Toronto's big business elite. But he has continued to enjoy substantial support among the federal and Ontario Conservative Party leaderships. Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, a staunch Ford supporter, almost came to blows on the floor of the country's parliament with Employment Minister Jason Kenney, after Kenney broke party ranks to call

for the mayor's resignation. The federal Conservatives, although clearly embarrassed by Ford, nonetheless cleave to his right-wing positions and gaze enviously on the mayor's hard-core "Ford Nation" supporters who they hope can be both financially and electorally mobilized behind them in the upcoming 2015 federal election.

Similarly, the provincial Conservatives under party leader Tim Hudak are hedging their bets. Hudak has not only been a fellow-traveler with Ford on the far-right of the Conservative Party. He also needs to make inroads into the Liberal stronghold of Toronto if he is to have any hope of unseating the Liberal government of Premier Kathleen Wynne. Thusly, Ford's equally controversial brother, Doug, currently a city councilman, has not been ruled out by Hudak as a possible candidate for his party in a provincial election that could happen as early as this spring. Doug Ford, who has often been the point man for his brother in the mayor's skirmishes with the press and police, was himself the subject of a story by the *Globe and Mail* which reported that he ran a high-volume hashish business several decades ago.

There have been other signs of the tentative rehabilitation of Mayor Ford amongst sections of the Conservative Party. Lisa McLeod, one of Hudak's front-benchers, praised Ford for his leadership during the Christmas ice storm that knocked out power for hundreds of thousands of citizens in the Greater Toronto Area for as long as a week. McLeod referred to Ford, who has been largely side-lined by a city council that has transferred most of his powers to deputy mayor Norm Kelly, as the "go to" leader during the crisis. In actual fact, Ford's role was limited to reading statements handed to him by Kelly's emergency management team on power restoration updates.

The ongoing, if still tentative, rehabilitation of Ford and his continued command of a bloc of perhaps a third of Toronto voters does not speak to the inherent strength of a right-wing populist movement. Figures like Ford are thrust into the forefront precisely to counter the general shift of the population away from the traditional bourgeois political establishment and are able to rally significant support only to the extent that the working class is politically suppressed by the social-democrats of the NDP and their supporters in the trade union bureaucracy. The growth of popular discontent with all the representatives of big business, fueled by continuing unemployment and increasing poverty, must and will find political expression in a mass movement against a system that unfailingly places the interests of the financial and corporate elite above those of working people.



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