

City strike: patience, resourcefulness are indeed virtues

City Views

By DAVID NICKLE
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It is Day 11 of the municipal workers' strike as I write this, and the time has come to think about what to do with the garbage in the City Hall Press Gallery.

It has been accumulating for about two weeks now, and while the smell is manageable, the can is very full and there have been reports of flies. We had a little meeting, we city hall reporters, and made a note of the fact that no one is taking away our garbage. And the result of it all is that shortly after I write this, I will haul it down to my car, sneak it past the striking members of CUPE Local 79 and haul it to one of the temporary dump sites (I'm thinking the one in the port lands).

I lead with this rather prosaic little anecdote as a sort of pre-emptive mea culpa. Because earlier in the week, I was astounded to learn from Etobicoke Guardian reporter Tamara Shephard that business-owners in north Etobicoke apparently went through most of a week before they realized something was going on with city services. They put out their garbage as they always did, and were quite surprised to learn that there was a strike going on, and there would be no garbage collection this week, and probably the next week, too.

The reason? According to one local business leader, they were all too busy running their businesses to read the newspaper, look at the Internet or listen to the radio. Language barriers made it even harder.

Oh, the screed I was about to write. I'd have granted that language barriers are a problem, but beyond that - the idea that anyone in Toronto would be so out-of-touch, so completely clueless as to fail to recognize that the city had shut down, to not have made some sort of alternate arrangement - it raises the question: just how clueless can one be?

As clueless, say, as a bunch of city hall reporters who only think to empty their communal garbage pail when it's overflowing and starting to attract flies?

It might be a fairer thing to that this strike has served as a serious wake-up call, as to how much we've come to depend on having a relatively smooth-running city government to wipe our chins and change our nappies (in some cases literally - 57 city-run childcare centres across the city have been shut down by the strike).

And so we have to be told, and in some cases scolded, into doing those things that we ought to have thought of ourselves. At last count, for instance, the city's skeleton crew of management workers had managed to lay 200 charges of illegal dumping on Torontonians who lacked either the imagination or just the civic decency to recognize the problems they caused by dumping their garbage at the roadside, in parks and by garbage cans.

By all indications, we're going to be in this for awhile. Talks between the unions and the city are continuing, but without much progress. There is no appetite for back-to-work legislation at either the province or the mayor's office, and the 12-week-and-counting municipal strike in Windsor shows just how long a strike can go on in this province.

We are going to have to be patient, and we are going to have to be resourceful. We are going to have to look after ourselves and each other.

At some point, we are going to have to hold our mayor and our councillors, and yes, the unions that represent our municipal workers, to account for the expanded trouble that a diminished city government has caused us.

But not until we have taken care of that can of garbage in the common area. Nothing ruins your credibility like a big cloud of flies.