

What Mayor won't say could hurt him

Peter Kuitenbrouwer, National Post Published: Friday, July 03, 2009

Mayor David Miller, who is a formidable orator, has a simple speech to make this week, to rally Toronto to his side as the municipal workers' strike drags into its third week.

The Mayor should remind us that his administration has always stood with the working women and men of the City of Toronto. He must remind the union he has protected their jobs even when contracting-out would save money. He brought once-privatized waste collection in the former City of York into the public union fold. He has made a fair contract offer, and he wants the workers to get back to work.

But he can't say it. He is taking on the workers, but his heart is not in it.

Even on Monday, when he tried to get tough, telling a news conference he was "frustrated" at CUPE Local 79, he prefaced it with kind words for the strikers: "The situation is also not easy on our employees and their families." He looked gaunt.

Our Mayor faces the biggest challenge of his six years at the helm. The problem is that as he stays quiet, TV replays images of garbage piling up in our parks. If Mr. Miller does not soon find a way to articulate the voice of the average Torontonians, he will have a difficult time winning re-election next year.

Even members of the Mayor's executive committee are starting to get restless.

"He's doing OK," Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti (York West) said of Mr. Miller yesterday.

"In my particular community the rage is completely against the union. The time will come when the Mayor is going to have to be as tough as he can be on the workers. If I were the Mayor, that time would come very soon."

Mr. Mammoliti understands why the Mayor is shaken.

"CUPE [the Canadian Union of Public Employees] has nothing to complain about with this Mayor," he notes. "He has given them what they want." Now, "he's alienated or is alienating a good base that has helped him along."

The Mayor is learning the tough truth about friendship, and my old political science readings come back to me. As Niccolo Machiavelli notes in *The Prince*, it is better to be feared than loved, because: "Love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fail."

Rather than rule and look strong, though, the Mayor seems sometimes to be working for the union. As the strike began, his threat was to the public: "Illegal dumping will not be tolerated." Then he cancelled the city's Canada Day events and the farmers' markets, and stood by quietly while the union occupied a Jazz Festival stage in Nathan Phillips Square for a rally.

So can the Mayor change his tune? "Does a leopard change his spots?" asks Councillor Doug Holyday (Etobicoke Centre). "I've heard the disenchantment with Miller from long before the strike."



Mike Cassese, Reuters Files As garbage piles up during the municipal workers' strike, Mayor David Miller's popularity continues to slide.

Pollster John Wright of Ipsos Reid has been tracking the Mayor for years, and has watched his popularity slide from 69% four years ago to 43% today.

A poll last week showed the Mayor would likely lose to either John Tory, the former Progressive Conservative leader, or George Smitherman, the deputy premier, if an election were held today.

"Forget the trash issue," Mr. Wright said yesterday. "Is Toronto working? This is a city that has ground to a halt."

Mr. Wright, for one, thinks Mr. Tory's time is ripe.

But it would be wrong to count the Mayor out just yet. He may not be as popular as Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion, but he is a smart and capable man. He knows how to move his big frame to gain physical advantage in person; his self-esteem, combined with his knowledge of the minutiae of Toronto's large and complex government, make him an impressive incumbent.

Mr. Mammoliti suggests a way for the Mayor to turn the strike to his advantage. "If he becomes as tough as I think he should be, he will bring confidence in people who have never voted for him."