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Persichilli: Mayoral election is about Miller, not Ford

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Rob Ford is neither a candidate to fear nor a political phenomenon. He is only an individual who is in the right place at the right time. The Oct. 25 vote is not about Ford, it's a referendum on outgoing Mayor David Miller and his cronies.

This campaign is about four things: the repudiation of Miller's vision of Toronto; the revolt of the suburban "colonies"; the frustration of people in the downtown core; and the inability of the other candidates to understand the first three of these factors.

Miller thinks that his Toronto is the real Canada. He's wrong. Miller's Toronto it's only a distillation of this complex country seen through magnifying, distorting glasses. His Toronto is a concentration of Canadian virtues and imperfections, blown up and stuffed together into a few square kilometres around city hall.

There we have the best museums, art galleries and universities, but also a lot of ignorance just a few hundred metres away from those institutions. There are religious icons like St. Michael's Cathedral, but also in the same street many organizations that are challenging Catholic doctrine. You find the opulent banks at Bay and King, but also food banks around the corner. There are the beautiful houses of the Rosedale enclave, but also a lot of homeless people. There are expensive and fancy cars, but also people who cannot even afford the TTC.

Miller didn't deal with any of these contradictions. He made them worse by promoting petty projects like bike lanes that were sold as a social revolution, an environmental game-changer. His approach to government has been much like the behaviour of rich socialites who pollute the environment with their SUVs and private planes or sully the lakes in Muskoka with their powerboats and then engage in petty projects such as sending their children to volunteer at the food bank or to some camp in a Third World country for a photo-op to fabricate a social conscience.

Miller's administration is identified with traffic jams that are fouling the environment; a "special relationship" with the unions and friendly, costly contractors; the garbage strike, which exposed his lack of leadership; waste; tax increases and, most of all, the typical in-your-face attitude of a messiah who thinks he can disregard the opinions of his ignorant subjects.

Torontonians are tired of a mayor who believes that amalgamation never happened, and that the real Toronto remains the downtown core while the rest of the megacity is just a dormitory agglomeration of houses and corner stores. The push for change is coming from suburbanites who want to put an end to the perception they are no more than a legislative nuisance.

But the revolt is spreading downtown, where people are fed up with the endemic traffic jams that harm business and infuriate individuals, and challenged by the proliferation of irritating speed bumps and annoying bike lanes that are seen as a declaration of war against cars.

Torontonians for the first time want to become a megacity. Toronto wants to retain the status of a city that promotes culture and serves as the financial and economic engine of this country. But Toronto is also about people, the ones who wake up in the morning to go to work, take the children to school and who pay taxes to make Canada work.

Ford has addressed some of the problems of Miller's administration but only with generic statements such as, "We're going to put more money in your pocket"; he talks about cutting expenses and makes generic accusations of corruption. In doing so, Ford is addressing citizens' frustration but not its cause. He is a painkiller for someone with a broken hip.

Unfortunately, his opponents have done worse. They are trying to create an "Anybody But Ford" movement while the electorate has created an "Anybody But Miller-like" movement, and Ford is the closest thing they have.

The attacks on Ford are deflected by the electorate's desire for change, and the politics of fear won't work when the desire for change is greater.

Mr. "Anybody But Ford" has four weeks to understand that — and much less time to do something about it.

Angelo Persichilli is the political editor of *Corriere Canadese*. His column appears Sunday.