

Toronto elite ostracizes right-wing mayor who served as their hatchet man

By Dylan Lubao
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Toronto Mayor Rob Ford—a right-wing populist, “law and order” advocate, and champion of the police—continues to be dogged by a drug scandal and politically shaken by defections from his administration.

The city’s big business elite, which promoted Ford as their hatchet man in slashing public services and attacking city workers, has signaled that they now view him as a political liability, whose hotheadedness and multiple scandals have become an impediment to prosecuting their class war agenda.

Expressing the prevailing mood among the ruling elite, Ontario Liberal Premier Kathleen Wynne said last week that she was “worried about the situation” and vowed to monitor it “very carefully” and intervene “as appropriate.” Dwight Duncan, the recently retired Ontario Liberal finance minister-turned-businessman, called for the mayor’s resignation in no uncertain terms, citing the potentially harmful effect of the scandal on the Toronto economy.

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper and provincial Tory leader Tim Hudak, both prominent Ford allies, have maintained an embarrassed silence. Tory House Leader Jim Wilson distanced the party from the mayor’s older brother, City Councilor Doug Ford, who was recently “outed” in an exhaustive *Globe and Mail* exposé as an alleged drug dealer in his youth. Responding to the elder Ford’s much-discussed intention to run under the Tory banner for a seat in the provincial legislature, Wilson declared, “He is not our candidate.”

Underscoring the kinship between the Ford administration and the Harper government, Conservative Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, another Ford ally and family friend, reportedly met the mayor in private last weekend to counsel him on “personal” matters. Flaherty and the late family patriarch Doug Ford Sr. served together as Tory members of the provincial parliament in the late 1990s under arch right-winger Premier Mike Harris.

Ford—who was accused last month of having been recorded smoking crack cocaine while spouting racist and homophobic epithets in a video peddled by “Somali

gangsters” to local and online media outlets—has witnessed his political support at city hall shrivel. Councilors Doug Holyday and Gary Crawford, who serve on Ford’s executive committee, have publicly said that they believe the video exists. Holyday previously led half of the executive in demanding that Ford respond “openly and transparently” to the allegations against him.

In the last two weeks, about a third of Mayor Ford’s staff have resigned or been dismissed. Ford fired his chief of staff Mark Towhey, reportedly because he had suggested the mayor go into rehab. Five other staffers have resigned. Ford has brought in replacements, including Eric Provost, Towhey’s former second-in-command, who has been elevated to chief of staff. Provost, a Liberal campaign specialist, has worked for former Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin, a fact that speaks to the essentially porous border between rival camps of the Canadian political elite.

The *Globe*, the traditional mouthpiece of Canada’s banks and investment dealers stepped up its attacks on the mayor, in an editorial this week that labeled Ford a “toxic political liability” and called for a less polarizing, “fiscally conservative” candidate to run for mayor in the 2014 civic elections. Giving voice to the ruling elite’s hopes to use the scandal enveloping Ford to fashion a more effective right-wing administration, *Globe* columnist Konrad Yakabuski admonished the mayor for failing to implement the full gamut of social spending cuts expected of him, including steeper cuts in city workers’ wages.

In the face of dwindling big business and Conservative support and much public outrage, Ford remains defiant, “absolutely” vowing to weather the scandal and run for reelection in 2014. Reports indicating that the infamous video has now “disappeared” seem to have emboldened the mayor, who has claimed to be the victim of a smear campaign by media “maggots.”

The right-wing *Toronto Sun* tabloid, a devoted Ford enthusiast, has remained largely silent since imploring him to step aside if the allegations of drug use were true.

The conservative *National Post*, which backed Ford in

2010 and initially expressed dismay at Ford's failure to provide a "serious explanation" for the accusations, now seems guardedly ambivalent about his clinging to office, despite reports from a right-wing insider that "Bay Street has abandoned him (Ford)" and are "looking for a new conservative candidate...to put their money behind."

Several names have been advanced within ruling class circles as a suitable successor to Ford, with both "right" and "left" candidates being groomed to take on the job of imposing austerity on working people, while pushing through the transportation infrastructure upgrades needed to make the city's economy a reliable producer of profit for big business. The potential candidates include the aptly named former Progressive Conservative leader John Tory and New Democratic Party Member of Parliament Olivia Chow, who assisted her late husband, Jack Layton, in presiding over the NDP's further lurch right.

Notorious for flouting city rules, shirking official responsibilities, and insulting immigrants, gays, the homeless and city workers, Ford has survived two earlier charges of wrongdoing. In January, a conflict of interest conviction that resulted in his being ordered to step down as mayor was overturned on a technicality. The next month, he received a slap on the wrist for overspending on his election campaign.

The consensus among the ruling elite, indicated by copious testimony in the corporate press, is that Rob Ford, the multimillionaire who fashioned a political persona as a spokesman of "working Joes," has long passed his best-before date.

While the specifics of Ford's unraveling are surprising, 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 and the austerity agenda that he has championed have faced mass working-class opposition throughout his tenure as mayor. But the official left in Toronto, the unions and the social-democratic NDP, and their liberal allies are utterly opposed to any mobilization of the social and independent political power of the working class. Their opposition to Ford has centered on scandalizing the public with exposures of his petty abuses of power and critiques of his buffoonish behaviour. To call attention to Ford's class war policies, would call attention to their own complicity in carrying out the agenda of big business.

Rob Ford's predecessor, the NDP and trade union-backed David 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. 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 "gravy train" on which city employees reputedly gorged. He was elected by only a quarter of total eligible voters.

When Ford moved to impose sweeping budget cuts and gut city worker contracts, the unions and "left" mounted only token opposition. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) deliberately separated the city workers' struggle against the destruction of job security—a critical step toward the privatizing of public services—from the fight against the budget cuts. Then, with Ford threatening to hire strikebreakers to break any strike against the city's concession demands, CUPE signed a concessions-laden agreement and told city workers that they would be "isolated" if they dared vote it down.

Having at every step facilitated Ford's "victories," the unions and NDP have invoked the right-wing threat represented by Ford and his provincial ally, Ontario Tory leader Tim Hudak, to intimidate the working class. In particular, they have invoked the Ford-Hudak tandem to justify their propping up a minority Ontario Liberal government that is slashing billions from social spending and has imposed sweeping concessions on the province's teachers through legislative fiat.

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