



Q & A with Richard Florida: What's next for Toronto?

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TORONTO – The city has faced a tumultuous week after a judge ruled Monday that embattled Mayor Rob Ford be ousted from office in December.

Toronto is at a crossroads, according to world-renowned urban studies expert Richard Florida. Florida shared his opinion on what the troubled city needs to help itself out of its plight in a recent *Toronto Life* [feature](#) that was published prior to Ford's guilty ruling.

Florida didn't hold back in conversation with Global News. He talks about how he thinks Ford has changed the city, and affected Toronto's global reputation.

Florida is the director of the University of Toronto's [Martin Prosperity Institute](#), a think tank research centre examining cities. He's taught at handfults of prestigious schools, including Carnegie Mellon University, and George Mason University, and he's a visiting professor at Harvard and MIT.

He's also founder of the [Creative Class Group](#), a Washington, DC-based think tank and author of several books.

Global News: You talk about the past five years leading Toronto to a crossroads. How would you describe Toronto when you moved here in 2007?

Richard Florida: Toronto is at a crossroads – a very big one. When I moved to Toronto it was ascendant, rapidly moving up the ranks of global cities. I would place it right at the very top of second tier cities, behind London and New York of course, but increasingly vying with cities like LA and Chicago. I was attracted to a great institute at a great university – the Martin Prosperity Institute in the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management – all moving quickly up the global ratings and rankings. Of course, Toronto was noted not just for its strong banks and media companies but as a leading creative economy, with a powerhouse music scene. More than that, it seemed to me to be the very model of an inclusive, just and socially cohesive city and region – a place that people from all over the world would aspire to live in—a place with a limitless future.

Economically, it is still doing quite well. Politically, it has suffered a very serious blow. The political gaffes and dysfunctions culminating in Ford's removal from office have already compromised the city's reputation and brand and its ability to attract top-flight global talent.

Global News: In your article, you say that Ford is a “symbol for Toronto's plight.” How much of this transformation is linked to Rob Ford and his decision-making while in office?

Richard Florida: Ford is disaster. But he is more a symptom of Toronto's broader leadership crisis. And it is the leadership crisis that is the number one priority the city and region have to solve. For years and years, the city has gotten away with what amounts to a dysfunctional leadership model. It's time to fix that. If we don't the city will begin to slip further and further behind in the global competition.

Ford's shenanigans have damaged Toronto's brand as a progressive, cutting edge, open-minded, modern urban center. He has made it harder for every single one of its great organizations to attract and recruit global talent.

Right at the outset, I could see that Ford's election was a signal that our city was suffering from the same sort of class divide found in U.S. cities – the one that led to the rise of Sarah Palin and the Tea Party.

This whole crisis—the mayoralty, its seeming collapse—has to be a wakeup call for Toronto that our leadership model is broken.

This is among the biggest challenges I have ever seen facing a city. Ignoring it will not make it go away. We have big, big problems in this city. Band-Aids are not going to help. It seems we want to wish this under the rug. Wake up Toronto, we can't. This is a big problem and it's not going away.

It's going to take a whole new model of leadership to address them. Nothing less than Toronto's future as a global city turns on how it addresses this deep and fundamental crisis.

Global News: What was your reaction when you first heard that Ford was ousted from office?

Richard Florida: The thing is that even though I knew the decision was coming, I forgot it was the same day as my birthday. When I heard he was removed on Monday morning – on Twitter of course – I immediately tweeted it was a pretty unbelievable birthday present.

I'm not so sure that he's really gone. We'll see how the appeal goes. Then there is the byelection, the prospect of his brother Doug running, and of course 2014. This is just going to go on and on and metastasize into a bigger thing and a bigger blotch on Toronto's reputation and future. It has the potential to keep us in the news globally as a laughingstock.

Global News: What does this mean for Toronto?

Richard Florida: In the short-run it's a big black mark on our image. It sets us back. It hurts our brand and our ability to attract great people. People who have choices, who are mobile, who can choose where they live, who are widely sought after – they see this kind of thing going on and say “What is wrong in Toronto? How did they get such a dolt for a mayor? And what is with this process of removing him and they can't even figure out how to choose a new mayor?” Not good at all.

I hope this will be a turning point – a wakeup call. But I'm not betting on that. Our leadership is beyond complacent. For the life of me, I cannot figure out why the folks who depend on this city are not up in arms.

I hope it will spur a reboot and reset. We'll see.

But trust me, if we don't wrap our collective arms around this – if we don't see it as a signal to fix our leadership and governance problems – lord help us. This will knock us off our trajectory and set us back as a global city.

Global News: You mention other Canadian cities and their growth in your Toronto Life

essay. How does Toronto compare on a national scale, to say, Vancouver and Montreal and cities gaining prominence such as Calgary? What are our strengths and weaknesses?

Richard Florida: Toronto is such a great global city: How could this happen here? That's what each and every one of us has to ask.