



Toronto Mayor Rob Ford during a debate on a proposed casino.

For The Globe and Mail

Beyond the Rob Ford embarrassment is a broken Toronto

Richard Florida

Published Sunday, May. 19, 2013 12:27PM EDT

Last updated Sunday, May. 19, 2013 05:20PM EDT

Long the epitome of a humane, prosperous, diverse, caring city, Toronto has at long last captured the world's attention – but not in the way that anyone would want. Mayor Rob Ford's latest scandal has drawn headlines in the [New York Times](#), [New York Magazine](#), and [Vanity Fair](#), making him the butt of jokes on talk shows like *Real Time with Bill Maher*, and even on the sports network ESPN.

And no, it's not going away. "Like most Americans, one of the few things I know about Canada is that it's supposed to be better than us. It's an almost unbearably functional place, what with its non-collapsed banking system and strongly growing economy and harmonious, cosmopolitan society (Quebec excepted)," [wrote Josh Barro](#) of *Bloomberg News*. "But I have bad news for you, Canada: Americans have learned about Rob Ford, and we'll have no more of your smug

superiority.” The collateral damage to the city’s once-vaunted reputation will sting for years to come.

My [views](#) on Ford’s mayoralty are [no secret](#). I’ve called him the [worst mayor](#) in the modern history of cities, an avatar for all that is small-bore and destructive of the urban fabric, and the most anti-urban mayor ever to preside over a big city.

I have tracked urban affairs for three decades, and I have never seen anything like this – not in my native Newark, N.J. , which has seen so many of its mayors in legal jeopardy or behind bars, not with [Marion Barry](#) or [Kwame Kilpatrick](#). Those were mayors of broken cities. Mr. Ford is the mayor of a thriving, growing, and in many ways model metropolis.

Circus that it is, this whole thing makes me sad – for the troubled mayor himself, our clearly dysfunctional political system, and for our great city left adrift. It’s time now for a deep reappraisal – not just of the mayor, who, let’s face it, most of us have made up our minds about – but of the entire leadership structure and governance model of our city and region. It’s important that we ask ourselves how we – and by *we* I mean all of us, not just Mr. Ford’s base – allowed Toronto to fall into the hands of a figurehead for some of the city’s angriest constituencies, who thought they could wield him as a club against the supposed downtown elites.

Most of all, we must acknowledge that Mr. Ford is a symptom of a set of much deeper maladies. Before Toronto can put itself back together, three key issues must be addressed:

First is the fact of a weak, dare I say, powerless mayor’s office. As I’ve argued in this paper and [elsewhere](#), Canada’s federal and provincial governments have downloaded many costs onto its cities, but left them with too little power to control their own destinies. As [Alan Broadbent](#) has pointed out, Toronto needs to become more like a province – with real power and the ability to raise real revenue to solve its problems and build its economy.

Second, we need to become a more unified city. The city and suburbs are riven by economic, political and cultural divides that I identified and mapped [in these pages](#) on the eve of Mr. Ford’s election. There are some who will argue that Toronto needs to undo the amalgamation of two decades ago. But the better course is to build one city. By working together to improve transit and reduce inequality, the cities and towns that comprise the Toronto metro can leverage their resources and compete that much more effectively with larger cities around the world. Both lose if they remain rivals: Mr. Ford’s mayoralty is the proof of that.

Third, the city and the region need grown-up leadership. We have to put an end once and for all to the dysfunction in the mayor’s office, in city hall, and in our politics broadly. We have many dedicated, hard-working and productive government officials, but they are trapped in a broken, outmoded structure. We need to fix it from bottom to top.

It is time to convene a blue-ribbon commission on Toronto’s future. Everything must be on the table – the powers of the city, its mayor, the Council; the kinds of revenue-raising authority it needs to fund transit, infrastructure and more; the way to craft a governance system that is up to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

This won't be the first time a city has remade its government. London, remember, did not have a mayor until 2000, and British observers agree that office has been a [tremendous success](#). Toronto needs to undertake a reorganization on the same kind of scale.

To get there, the top leaders of all of our key institutions must step up – our banks and corporations, schools and universities, labour unions, the city, the province, and more. No one can stand on the sidelines if we are going to forge the model of private-public partnership that is needed to put our city back on track.

The pace at which something like this happens will tell us whether Toronto has the will to solve its crisis and become the global city that it once seemed destined to be – and whether its future mayors will look less like Rob Ford and more like New York's Mike Bloomberg, Chicago's Rahm Emmanuel, London's Boris Johnson, and Calgary's Naheed Nenshi.

Perhaps this is the bright side of Mr. Ford's reign – that, as disastrous and dysfunctional as it has been, it provides the critical spark that at long last can ignite the passion, the momentum, and the clarity of vision needed to bridge Toronto's many divides, and allow it to take its place in the ranks of truly great global cities.

Richard Florida is Director of the [Martin Prosperity Institute](#) at the [University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management](#).

Editor's note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly named Bill Maher's show as Politically Incorrect. Politically Incorrect was cancelled in 2002. Mr. Maher's new show is called Real Time with Bill Maher.

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