

This copy is for your personal non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies of Toronto Star content for distribution to colleagues, clients or customers, or inquire about permissions/licensing, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com

CONTRIBUTORS

OPINION

People power can save Toronto's rotting democracy

If leaders inject enough bad and self-serving ideas into our local democracy, eventually it will metastasize. We can't just continue watching this happen.

By **Josh Fullan** Contributor

Sun., Dec. 18, 2022 | 🕒 3 min. read

Toronto's democracy is rotting from the inside — and if you take our mayor's word for it, nobody cares.

The outward physical signs of Toronto's decay have been with us for some time now. We see the sidewalk on Dufferin St. in front of Wallace-Emerson Community Centre that looks like the surface of the moon after heavy artillery, or the interior and bus bays of Islington subway station that are literally falling apart around commuters. Crumbling infrastructure, once a shocking disgrace in a wealthy metropolis, has become the status quo on nearly every block. We are a [city in decline](#), lurching out of a pandemic.

But it's the inner, spiritual rot that is more covert and troubling. A scan of city hall in recent years reveals a steady moral bankrupting of our local government, some of it by stealth and some by the ham fist of the province. In 2018, in the middle of a municipal election, [the Ford government sliced the number](#) of Toronto's local representatives nearly in half. This resulted in outsized constituencies impossible to connect with, followed by the twin intended consequences of citizen disengagement and city councillor burnout.

Sure enough, when the next election came along without fanfare this year, several incumbent councillors decided not to run for a job they no longer believed made any worthwhile difference, and less than [30 per cent of Toronto voters cast their ballots](#). It felt like local democracy was taking a nap. The election cycle itself was kept on a starvation diet, with scant competition of ideas or debate of issues. But if few of us seemed to care about the level of government closest to our daily lives, it was by design.

Most recently, with [Bill 3 and Bill 39](#), the Ford government continues to smooth the path toward Toronto council's irrelevance by turbocharging the mayor's executive role through a number of new powers. The most plainly objectionable of these is [the ability to override majority rule to enact provincial priorities](#). In direct terms, on certain issues, the side with more councillor votes no longer has more power. In consequence, the deliberative work of compromise and debate that the mayor and his allies needed to engage in to get some of that power is no longer relevant.

These are exceptional powers that lie in no degree of proximity to democratic principles, and no amount of trust or benevolence can bring them any closer.

A quality I admire in our mayor is his commitment to small, everyday connections across the city. He goes where people are, shows up at events or meetings, talks and listens. A few weeks ago, he waved cheerily and high-fived kids as he walked by my family at a frigid Santa Claus parade, while moments later our police chief rolled by in a tinted SUV that might as well have been an armoured tank. Some might say that the mayor's superficial glad-handing obscures his policy record, which includes looming disasters like the Gardiner East rebuild. I would argue that the bits of connective tissue John Tory faithfully sews throughout the city are vital to making residents feel secure and like they matter. This is our mayor at his best.

Earlier this week, the mayor responded — much more emphatically than is typical for him — to a reporter’s pointed question about Bill 39 by saying that [nobody asks him about his new undemocratic powers](#) when he is out making connections across Toronto. The clear implication was that nobody cares, which is just a way of telling the many people who do in fact care that they don’t matter. This is our mayor at his worst.

If leaders inject enough bad and self-serving ideas into our local democracy, eventually it will metastasize into something irrecoverable. We can continue to watch this happen, content to pick at the scabs — or we can show them the true meaning of people power.

Josh Fullan is director of Maximum City.

Read more about: [Doug Ford, John Tory](#)

SHARE:

Copyright owned or licensed by Toronto Star Newspapers Limited. All rights reserved. Reproduction or distribution of this content is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Toronto Star Newspapers Limited and/or its licensors. To order copies of Toronto Star articles, please go to: www.TorontoStarReprints.com
