



*Happier Days for Mayor Gillingham and Brian Mayes*

You know, for a minute there I was feeling more optimistic about our Mayor and City Council. Reason one being the approval of the most realistic, if not the best, urban forestry budget in decades. One sufficient to ensure the maintenance and protection of our boulevard trees for at least the next four years.

Also cause for optimism was a motion passed in 2023 to have Winnipeg sign the Montreal Biodiversity Pledge, committing the city to protect and restore the natural habitats that ensure biodiversity. Councillor Brian Mayes seconded that motion, then went on to become the first chair of the new Citizens Committee on Climate Change, an advisory group to the Water Waste and Environment Sub-committee he then chaired.

The city also got on board to receive a hefty chunk of money from the Feds to facilitate infill, the aim being to create denser more walkable neighbourhoods. With the right approach to infill, Winnipeg’s city center might begin to look more like Montreal’s vibrant downtown instead of looking, as it currently does, like downtown Detroit a decade ago.

Then July 24<sup>th</sup> happened.

That day, Mayor Scott Gillingham ripped a page out of the Trump playbook and fired Councillor Mayes, in absentia, from the city’s Executive Policy Committee (EPC) and as Chair of the Water, Waste and Environment Subcommittee. At the time, Mayes was at an out-of-town conference, researching green infrastructure, precisely the kind of infrastructure we need to address the extreme weather associated with climate change.

So why was Mayes fired?

Well, according to the mayor, Mayes was asked to step down to ensure “harmony” on the EPC. Which means, in a nutshell, that he wasn’t towing the line on the Mayor’s pet projects.

Specifically, Mayes voted against initiating the project to widen Kenaston – something I also oppose. He’s also been critical of the way the city plans to roll out the zoning changes needed to facilitate infill – a position I don’t always agree with - and outspoken in his criticism of the failure to provide the funds needed to upgrade an ailing sewer system that dumped 5.4 billion litres of raw sewage into our rivers last year.

Now, some might argue this doesn’t speak well of Mayes as a “team player.”

But here’s the thing - democracy isn’t a hierarchical sport, where the coach is the “my way or the highway” boss and the team just falls into line. Democracy thrives in an atmosphere that welcomes diversity and dissent, and the best leaders surround themselves, not with “yes men,” but with smart, independent thinkers who are strong enough to challenge their ideas, policies and actions.



Now, don’t get me wrong. I don’t always agree with Mayes. As a result, I’ve been subject to his wrath, not to mention his cut and thrust approach to debate. I’ve also witnessed his mounting and visible frustration with the contradictory actions of some of his colleagues.

But is Mayes’ sometimes combative approach sufficient cause to fire him, just six days short of breaking the record for the longest consecutive serving member of the EPC?

Not for me it isn’t. After all, isn’t that why we vote for one candidate over another? Not because they’re “nice,” but because we know they’ll go to the mat to defend the public

interest? And doesn't Mayes' long tenure on EPC, under three different mayors, suggest not only an ability to fight but an equal capacity to collaborate and compromise?

It certainly suggests that to me.

Plus there is something deeply ironic about Gillingham's action when, at the beginning of his tenure, he asked the province to change the City Charter to limit the concentration of power in the mayor's office and give council the right to decide whether or not it even wants an Executive Policy Committee.

Those changes never happened. Instead, the EPC was reduced to six members, while power remains concentrated in the mayor's office and his now "harmonious" inner circle, with other councillors largely shut out of the process. It's also the mayor who appoints EPC members and, apparently, has sole right to fire them.

As a result, Gillingham can push through his agenda on projects like widening Kenaston Blvd. And in firing Mayes, he's clearly signalled to other councillors that challenging his agenda will guarantee banishment from the locus of power.

It's unfortunate, because after winning with less than 28% of the vote, Gillingham seemed to be willing to formulate policy by consulting and listening to divergent opinions and ideas. By firing Mayes, he's demonstrated that while he may appear to be listening, when push comes to shove, he's a "my way or the highway" kind of mayor.

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