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Poll serves as warning to pols

Allison Hanes, National Post

City workers in Toronto may be on strike, but politicians most certainly are not. If anything, the five-week labour disruption has provided public office holders with ample opportunity for heightened visibility -- and a chance to test their mettle in a crisis.

Yesterday alone, two men touted as potential contenders in next year's mayoral election -- Deputy Premier George Smitherman and former Ontario Progressive Conservative leader John Tory -- were out cleaning the streets together.

Rivals of the sitting Mayor held a press conference to denounce his leadership on the sensitive topic of garbage. Meanwhile, David Miller himself took the podium to tell Toronto residents about the latest tweaking of city contingency plans and to talk tough when asked about the stakes at the bargaining table.

A poll out yesterday showed Toronto's politicians have reason to be mindful of the strike's legacy on their images. Innovative Research is tracking public opinion and has compared the Toronto results to Vancouver -- where former mayor Sam Sullivan was defeated in the fallout from a labour stoppage there in 2007.

The poll shows Torontonians blame the union three to one for the mess, whereas in Vancouver

support was strong, then dipped, then rebounded again.

In Toronto that hasn't translated into much love for the city. Six in 10 polled disapprove of Mr. Miller's role, while four in 10 strongly disapprove.

The silver lining is that the more intensely Torontonians see the unions as unreasonable, the more vigorously they support the city's position.

Both Mr. Smitherman, out for the second time in as many weeks to sweep litter, and Mr. Tory, making his debut, denied they have designs on the job of Toronto mayor, insisting they were just doing their civic duty.

"I'm obviously not the mayor," Mr. Smitherman said as he evaded TV cameras. "I'm a local representative who has the capacity to do one thing in the circumstances."

Mr. Miller smiled with amusement when asked yesterday about all the politicians pitching in to keep Toronto clean. "I think Torontonians, including their elected officials, have been terrific," he said.

But at a press conference at city hall, conservative councillors united under the umbrella of the Responsible Government Group wondered why the Mayor hasn't joined the efforts.

"The Mayor isn't out there and I don't expect he will go out, given his track record," said Case Ootes (Toronto Danforth), who held a cleanup day of his own last weekend.

The group hammered Mr. Miller yesterday on his handling of the most controversial issue of the strike: garbage. The coalition of co-operating councillors demanded that the Mayor remove trash from 24 existing temporary dumps and reuse them rather than opening new sites in new parks.

"Before we destroy more of our parks and playgrounds, we need the Mayor to take action," Mr. Ootes said. "The negative impact of our green spaces is stretched to the limit."

"Parks are for people, not garbage," said David Shiner (Willowdale).

During lulls in the strike, the Responsible Government Group has issued releases and pressed the Mayor to convene the employee and labour-relations committee or call a council meeting, although they concede they support the city's tough bargaining position and oppose back-to-work legislation that would bring a speedy, but pricey, end to the strike.

Yesterday the councillors said the city should hire replacement workers to haul away the trash, an idea Mr. Miller later ruled out.

"Obviously nobody wants to have temporary drop-offs in their neighbourhood -- nobody does.... And I understand people's frustration. On the other hand, people in Toronto are being terrific in the way they are accommodating this completely unnecessary labour disruption," he said. "We developed a contingency plan allowing the city to operate as best as possible based on what happened in 2002 when things did not work very well. We have found a way for this city to work as best as is possible."

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