

Toronto mayor's other 'crack' scandal: dividing urban-suburban residents

While Toronto Mayor Rob Ford has been under fire for a video allegedly showing him smoking crack, critics say his most offensive behavior has been his polarization of the city.



Michelle Siu/The Canadian Press/AP

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford answers questions at a news conference in Toronto last month. Mr. Ford has transfixed North Americans since published accounts surfaced of a video that apparently shows him puffing from a glass crack pipe.

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TORONTO

The streets of Toronto in early summer are a postcard vision of the world's expectation of Canada: Friendly, sun-hungry Canadians lounge in the city's plentiful parks, and stroll on the preternaturally clean sidewalks.

Yet the biggest news in Canada's largest city veers dramatically from the boring-but-polite Canuck stereotype that Torontonians suffer from abroad. Last month, news broke that the conservative mayor, Rob Ford, was caught on video making homophobic and racist comments – and smoking crack cocaine.

The uproar is far from the first that Mr. Ford has provoked. Other major incidents include racist and sexist remarks, calls to police by family members reporting threats from Ford, his own expletive-filled 911 call when a journalist tried to interview him at home, reading and talking on his cell phone while driving, being kicked out of a military gala and a Maple Leafs game for drunken behavior, and allegedly groping a colleague, among other highlights.

Yet, for his opponents, Ford's most offensive behavior has been his polarization of the city, pitting the more conservative suburbs – full of Ford's loyal supporters, who call themselves "Ford Nation" – against the more liberal downtown.

Urban-suburban divide

While American cities have had their Buddy Ciancis and Marion Barrys, the mayor of Toronto holds a unique level of responsibility: running Canada's sixth largest government and North America's fourth largest city, a dynamic, diverse metropolis where more high-rises are being built than anywhere else in the Western hemisphere.

The city's suburb-downtown family feud began before Ford's political entrance,

when his father was a conservative Ontario parliamentarian.

In 1998, then-head of Ontario Mike Harris forced what analysts have called a “shotgun wedding,” merging Toronto with five adjoining suburbs, which resulted in hikes in taxes and public transit fares as the city became responsible for providing services to a drastically larger geographic area.

Although residents, the Toronto mayor, and leaders of four of the five suburbs protested loudly, the "amalgamation" passed, granting conservatives a larger percentage of parliament seats – and the likelihood that the new gerrymandered version of Toronto would elect conservative suburban mayors.

That is just what happened in 2010 when Ford came to power by playing on the urban-suburban divide. During his mayoral campaign, Ford railed against taxes and “the gravy train” of public spending, a popular sentiment among suburbanites whose time spent downtown was often limited to commuting by car to work and cheering at hockey or baseball games.

Driving debate

And Ford has remained markedly anti-urban in office, which impacts daily life for millions. Despite leading a cosmopolitan city that imagines itself in a European mold, Toronto lags in walkability and quality of life for urbanites.

In particular, Ford has adamantly opposed public transportation funding, even though Toronto’s system is so outdated and underfunded that the average round trip commute is 98 minutes per day – and this in a city almost half the size of New York City, where the average commute is two-thirds as long. The gridlock caused by competing cars and streetcars costs the city \$6 billion in productivity each year, according to the Toronto Region Board of Trade.

And all but the bravest Torontonians can forget about biking to work: The city has

the nation's highest rate of cyclist collisions. Only a small handful of streets have bike lanes – not including a major thoroughfare where Ford applauded the removal of a bike lane last year – and police often pass by taxis and cars parked in the middle of those lanes.

This spring, Ford rallied against a proposed city hall bike station with showers, and while a city councillor, he said that if bikers were killed on the road, “it’s their own fault.”

“For 25 years,” according to University of Toronto civil engineering professor Eric Miller, “we haven’t been building much in the way of new transit infrastructure in the city of Toronto. So we face a huge infrastructure deficit. That was the context in which Rob Ford arrived on the scene. He doesn’t believe that roads are for transit. Roads are for cars. They’re not for people. They’re not for bicycles. He has turned transit into a wedge issue with the electorate.”

Ford Nation

Yet despite the boorish behavior and accompanying uproars, Ford’s loyal support base has held firm. After an initial post-election honeymoon phase and subsequent slides, Ford’s overall approval ratings have wavered little since September 2011.

In particular, compared to the descent in voter support downtown, suburban belief in Ford has stayed steady. His followers range from Somali and Italian immigrants who cite his support of their communities while a city councilor, to former opponents who approve of his hands-on approach to solving municipal problems, to Torontonians happy with Ford’s mayoral push against liberalism and in favor of lower taxes and smaller government.

Ford Nation is also a cult of Ford’s personality. Facebook supporters hail his chutzpah as much as his policies: “Anyone else would have ‘caved’ under the

pressure of those wild villains, Mr. Mayor! You have great strength,” wrote one commenter, with another adding, “If [R]ob wasn't in charge the city would just keep picking our pocket.”

As the battle over the tarnishing of Toronto’s polite image and its urban future continues, the praise for Ford does as well: “Ford is the light!” and “Long live Rob Ford, greatest mayor ever!!!”

Crack video

And when it comes to the alleged video of Ford smoking crack, Toronto residents are split, right down the lines Ford himself drew.

The video came to light last month, after a local drug dealer shopped the cellphone video to news outlets, including American website Gawker, which raised \$200,000 on Kickstarter to buy the video. Since then, however, the drug dealer has gone underground, along with the video. On Thursday, reports surfaced that four days after the initial crack video news, an armed man invaded the house where the video may have been filmed, beating two inhabitants, one of whom was a high school classmate of Ford's.

The resulting climate in Toronto is circus-like. Ontario’s premier has researched whether the province can intervene, anonymous city hall sources claim Ford does have a drug problem and knew the exact address of the video’s location, several mayoral staffers have resigned or been fired, and the Globe and Mail published allegations that Ford’s city councilor brother, Doug, dealt hashish in the 1980s. For his part, Ford denies smoking crack or that the video even exists.

According to a poll last week by two local TV stations, more than half of Torontonians believe the crack video “exists and is real.” Go downtown, and that number jumps to nearly two-thirds.

But for now, despite protests from city leaders and citizens, Ford insists he is not going anywhere. And critics say Toronto would suffer as a result.

“We won’t have effective leadership in Canada’s biggest and most diverse city,” Ryerson University business ethics professor Chris Macdonald told the CBC last week. “What we’re not going to see is the kind of vision that’s going to keep building us into a world-class city.”

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