

## Mayor's critics won't give credit where credit is due

David Miller's opponents are going after him on little things because they actually agree with him on the big ones

Marcus Gee

Toronto — From Thursday's Globe and Mail Last updated on Thursday, Jul. 23, 2009 12:51PM EDT

For years, critics of Mayor David Miller have been saying that he should curb spending by standing up to the unions. Now that he is doing just that, you might think they would give him a little credit. Instead, the anti-Miller forces on city council have seized on the strike by 30,000 city workers as a chance to wound the mayor. The result is a campaign of carping, kvetching and caviling that only underlines the weakness of the opposition at City Hall.

Cavil No. 1 is over councillors' pay. Mr. Miller's opponents say that he should set an example by calling a council meeting to roll back a recent pay hike for councillors. Otherwise, they say, the city looks two-faced when it calls on city workers to accept restraint in a time of economic hardship.

But he has already given up his own raise and frozen his office budget. Eighteen of 44 councillors have joined him in declining the 2.42-per-cent raise, an automatic yearly increase strictly pegged to inflation. Considering the city is offering workers a four-year contract with raises of 1 per cent, 1 per cent, 2 per cent and 3 per cent, a 2.42-per-cent increment hardly makes raging hypocrites even of the councillors who are taking the raise.

Cavil two is about council's right to know. Earlier in the strike, councillors complained that Mr. Miller wasn't telling them enough and demanded a meeting. He called together council's employee and labour relations committee and put out a new, public offer to the unions. Then his opponents demanded a full council meeting. Yesterday Wednesday Mr. Miller announced council would meet Aug. 5 and 6. In the meantime, he is keeping councillors briefed with a daily conference call. So much for that beef.

Cavil three is that the mayor isn't getting tough with the unions. Fair enough. The mayor could be doing more to deliver city services and control picket-line obstruction. But councillors mumble into their sleeves when asked what they would do in the mayor's position, with some calling for replacement workers to be brought in, others wanting private contractors and still others simply demanding "something, anything" from Mr. Miller.

It is no mystery why we hear all this pettifogging from council. Mr. Miller's opponents are going after him on little things because they actually agree with him on the big ones. They agree that he is right to wrest the outmoded bankable sick-leave benefit from the unions. They agree with him that the city can't afford a more generous wage or benefit package. They agree that it would be a mistake to seek provincial back-to-work legislation, which would saddle the city with an expensive arbitrated settlement.

In fact, on the most fundamental issues in the strike, they are on his side. Why can't they bring themselves to say so?

Ever since the leftish Mr. Miller was first elected in 2003, his critics on council's right wing have been calling him a big-spending, tax-raising patsy of the unions. Now that he is in a full-scale confrontation with city unions in the cause of fiscal responsibility, the least they could do is say that they are behind him.

That does not have to mean blind support. There are plenty of legitimate knocks against Mr. Miller: that he comes late to frugality after years of ambitious spending, that he has been too lax with city unions in the past, that he should have prepared Torontonians for this summer's labour clash. But Mr. Miller's critics prefer to chew at his trouser leg, hoping to ruin his chances of being re-elected next year.

In fact, their trouser biting only makes his re-election more likely. Defeating Mr. Miller in 2010 will require a coherent, united right-of-centre opposition. So far, no credible champion of the right has emerged on city council and the right's captious behaviour during the strike makes it seem more doubtful than ever that such a leader will come forward. To have any credibility, critics need to give credit where it is due. For standing up to the city's out-of-touch unions, the mayor deserves some support from even his harshest critics.