



Shifting fortunes spell end to an era

Don Braid

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An alderman who knows Mayor Dave Bronconnier well says something odd happens to him when the cameras go on. He suddenly sounds tight and even strident, especially when he's after the province for more money.

Then the lights go down and he's Bronco again -- amiable, sometimes kind, usually forceful but also conciliatory, and often very funny.

Bronconnier's split political personality also shows up in his dealings with Premier Ed Stelmach. The premier likes the private mayor, but can't stand the public one.

Bronconnier has never cared very much because Calgary voters have been behind him. But now the whole political climate is shifting. With times changing for the worse, and big tax hike proposals coming next week, the question is whether he's the right mayor for a new era.

Bronconnier created his own hard-charging persona and now he's stuck with it. He loves big projects and constantly chases the money to support them, whether from the province or through higher taxes.

That worked for seven years, but it's a tougher sell as house prices drop, retirement funds melt away, and city costs and taxes keep rising.

Bronconnier shows absolutely no sign of backing up. He keeps a careful eye on the economy, he says, and knows what Calgarians are going through; but he plans to keep building for the future.

"The easiest thing of all is to stop," he says. "That's what happened in 1984 and 1993. It's what some people would like to do now, but that's not the right way to do it and that's not what I intend to do."

Without Bronconnier, Calgary wouldn't have all the new LRT lines and roadways he pushed through council to make up for the inaction of the 1990s. He has also been spectacularly successful at prying money out of the province. Not so long ago, even conservative aldermen scrambled to climb on his bandwagon.

But now there's a rebellion brewing.

Ald. Ric McIver says Calgarians need "a little loving," not more taxes and spending. Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart adds: "I've never before felt this revolt or sense of pushback from Calgarians. It's coming from many people saying, 'You guys are out of touch down at City Hall.' "

A political opposition based on party loyalty is shaping up on council for the first time in decades. At least four aldermen are Stelmach loyalists who vote the provincial line.

This group includes Jim Stevenson, Ric McIver, Joe Connelly and Diane Colley-

Urquhart, all of whom attended the recent provincial Tory convention.

They constantly seek the backing of more independent conservatives on council, including aldermen Andre Chabot, Linda Fox-Melway and John Mar.

If those seven were patched together, along with just one one occasional ally like Ald. Dale Hodges, suddenly the Conservatives would have a mayor-crushing majority for council votes.

Stelmach's own strategists would love to install a true-blue party loyalist in Bronconnier's chair. If that happened in 2010, the premier would probably cheer the loudest.

The mayor hasn't said he wants a fourth term, but he enjoys a huge head start -- a surplus of at least \$316,000 in his running campaign account, even after he spent \$731,000 during the October 2007 election.

Bronconnier, probably one of the smartest mayors the city has had, might well be able to manoeuvre through this downturn without abandoning his goals.

Even if he does, though, he faces a mighty battle for control of council. The Pax Bronconnia is over.

dbraid@shaw.ca

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