

EXCALIBUR INTERVIEW

With Allan Sparrow on municipal reform

Allan Sparrow, currently city alderman in Toronto's Ward 6, has a long history of community organizing. Stressing the need for people to control their own neighbourhoods through community organizations and accountable aldermen, Sparrow has tried to foster a mutual trust between politician and constituent in his ward, and has spread this philosophy through his efforts in the Movement for Municipal Reform. Alderman Sparrow was interviewed at City Hall.

By JAMES BRENNAN

EXCALIBUR: How would you characterize the different political factions within metro council at present?

SPARROW: On metro council the situation is even more grim than it is on city council. There are only three or four solid reformers out of the thirty-odd members of metro council, basically Heap, Goldrick, Sewell and Vaughan. The voters are characteristically 27 to 4, 23 to 4, that kind of voting pattern. So Metro's in really bad shape. There are one or two other people like Joyce Trimmer, who will tend to vote in a more progressive way occasionally but it's extremely rare. Most of them are intimidated by the kind of power broking that goes on in Metro Council where most of the deals are made behind the scenes, and people just turn up to vote. Sewell, Heap and those people are quite a nuisance because they don't operate that way; they challenge that behaviour and try to get into an analysis of the problems.

A classic example of the kind of power brokerage business that goes on was with the TTC when Cosgrove wanted to show the people in Scarborough that he was pro-public transit. He wanted this extension of the Bloor Street line into Scarborough, and another alderman wanted to do the same in Etobicoke, so they huddled together and said if you vote for ours we'll vote for yours. So they came along to Council to line up their hands, even though the reform people in caucus had done enough analysis to indicate that the debt-load for the extensions and the operating costs are automatically going to add a nickel to every TTC fare next year, and that the facilities are going to be grossly underused in the indefinite future.

It's this monumental public works mentality that pervades most of metro. And most of the people are there to carve up the pie especially to get the public works goodies for their own boroughs.

Another thing is that very few members of metro council take any interest in the bureaucracy. The metro bureaucracy has increased from something like 5,500 employees to 6,500 in one year. That's over a thousand employees added. No one can see the benefit of it particularly, so they go on accepting the expansion programmes that the bureaucrats put forward to them.

Of course Paul Godfrey's constituency is the bureaucracy, that's where he gets his power. If you want the bureaucracy to work you have to go through Godfrey. For someone who is an appointed chairman, whose principal role should be to chair meetings and make sure things are done in an open and even-handed manner, he's an abysmal failure. He's taken advantage of his situation by lining up the bureaucrats, and with that power, doling out the goodies. So the politicians have to get in his good graces and the good graces of the bureaucrats to get anything done back in the boroughs. There's always this perverse dance to go through with Godfrey and the bureaucrats.

When you get down to Metro social services budget, we can't even get enough money out of them to take care of skid row and the drunks who are freezing to death, because that isn't of any interest to borough politicians because there aren't bums dying in North York or Scarborough or East York and so on.

Part of the problem is that most of the borough politicians are elected without having to appeal to the electorate on the basis of programme. It usually ends up being an appeal based on personality and how many ivory teeth they have and how good looking

their wife and kids and dogs are. In a number of cases they get elected by acclamation. The electorate doesn't pay enough attention to them or put enough pressure on them, and then politicians take advantage of the situation, manipulating their way into office on the basis that they are nice guys and don't have a criminal record and are still together with their family. Once they get down here they get involved in the wheeling and dealing of this giant game of monopoly that's going on down here. At least in the city you have to run a major campaign and can get elected on issues.

EXCALIBUR: Given these conditions, how did the Reform Caucus emerge?

SPARROW: One of the things that a number of us have been concerned about for years is the fact that, up until very recently, you can get elected without being accountable to anybody. I guess that John Sewell is the classic example of someone who worked very hard organizing Ward 7, trying to reflect the values of the people he worked with to organize the ward. That was perhaps the first major organizing effort that had taken place at a municipal level way back in 1968 and 1969.

At present Ward 6 is the most organized ward. Both (Dan) Heap and I are committed to working in that kind of milieu. We're part of an evolving process, trying to get away from the personality politics of it. For example if the community decides not to run us for this term, they would still be well enough organized to run another two candidates to represent their interests. This is a case of saying that there's a structure and a process which outlives the politician.

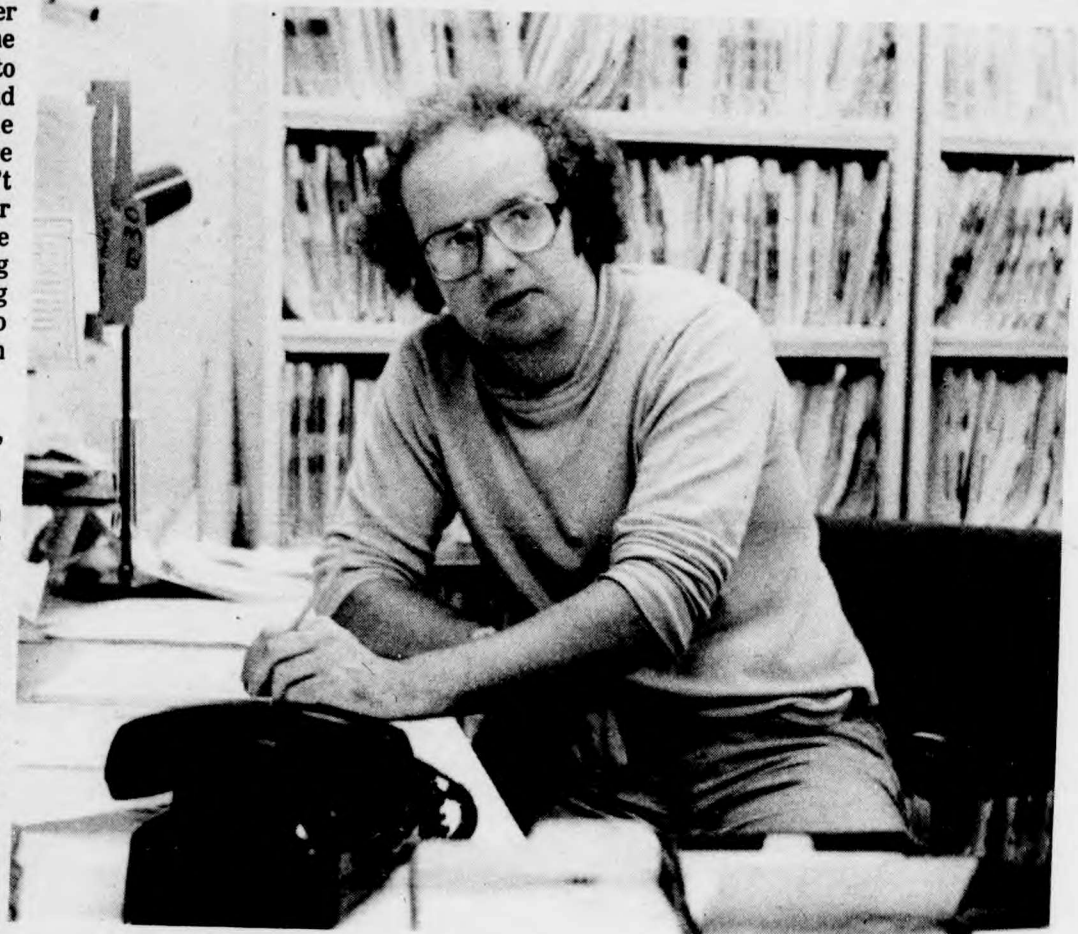
This formula has been applied in a couple of other places in a more primitive way. Ward 4 community organization is one example, though this was built in a much more truncated time frame. In Ward 9 a community process has been initiated, though again rather late, but the result is that they have a team of candidates who are running with perhaps more broadly based backing than anyone has had in that ward before. It's still not adequate but it's on its way.

In the boroughs very little has happened at all. A few good candidates have been attracted by the notion that we should have accountable politicians, that they should reflect the values of people at the local level, that they should work with other people across Metro to try and formulate some general policies for Metro that reflects the combination of all those interests at the local level. A few of these people have emerged with a handful of active supporters but with no real base. Given the nature of politics in the boroughs, a few of them will be elected just because it's such a wide-open deal. Of course they're going to have a much harder time, after the fact so to speak, establishing the base to which they might be accountable.

The one possible exception is in North York where Katie Hayhurst has been working very hard to establish this kind of philosophy in the borough. A number of good candidates have come forward and a cluster of good people have emerged.

A significant thing that happened in late 1975, early 1976 was that people in the Reform movement, looking back on the preceding six or seven years, realized that it was a completely unsatisfactory way of conducting municipal politics, that it had had no continuity. The dilemma was: do we form a party or do we try and form a movement. The reasonable thinking was that the Canadian political scene is littered with probably too many parties, and that at the municipal level people aren't really interested in party politics; they're interested in issues and in a broad based community approach to solving problems. So it was a very clear choice to form a movement, certainly a political movement to try and get accountable government at the municipal level.

EXCALIBUR: What do you feel about federal parties getting involved in municipal elections?



Borough politicians are elected on an appeal based on personality and how many ivory teeth they have and how good looking their wife and kids and dogs are.

SPARROW: They can't run them... they do such a terrible job on a national scale, I don't know why they'd want to bother at the municipal level.

The reason that you find reform politics in a somewhat fragmented state with little centres of strong activity, and some areas where there's nothing, is because Reform Metro (Movement for Municipal Reform) has only really been going for a period of eight or nine months in any kind of active way. The full effect of Reform Metro isn't going to be felt until the next election, not this one.

EXCALIBUR: Do you regard Metro Council as an effective area in which to push for progressive social objectives?

SPARROW: Well, unlike Chicago or New York, the boroughs, the city and most municipalities in Ontario work on a weak mayor system. David Crombie is one member out of 23. If you had 12 reformers, you could control city council, and the ripple effect would be fantastic throughout the province. The city, even in its present imperfect state, has done more to challenge the province and push the province towards more progressive legislation perhaps more than any other body.

If there were 12 of us, I don't know whether they'd tolerate it actually — they'd probably amend the Municipal Act to strip power away from us! Of course even though the powers we have are somewhat limited, the major power we have is in respect to the zoning bylaws. Through the zoning bylaws you can largely dictate the pattern of concentration of commercial and institutional regions in the central core. If you can freeze it out you can change the whole pattern of development, probably in the province. In theory you can do that anyway. If you're tough minded, you just have one by-law after another lined up, the net result being a freeze. I'm not advocating a freeze though I'm saying that something close to a freeze is

necessary. The 45 foot by-law was simply a temporary hold while a more rational plan as being worked out. Of course a more rational plan wasn't worked out.

EXCALIBUR: How do you feel about Mayor Crombie who was elected as a "reformer" and who has since announced that he is a member of the Conservative Party?

SPARROW: Crombie maintains that he never said that he was a reformer. I've looked at his literature and he hasn't carried out most of the promises in it. But, he never really did describe himself as a reformer. I think it was the incredible contrast between Grountenberg and O'Donohue who were selling off big chunks of the city as fast as they could to the highest bidder, and Crombie as a junior alderman who at least had brains to realize what they were up to, and distinguished himself from the. The contrast between those two clowns and Crombie was so pronounced that Crombie decided to make a run for mayor. It was an opportunistic move, and I don't mean that critically, because he realized how atrocious those two clowns were. He took a gamble that people could distinguish him from them, and he was right.

In Toronto, people aren't sophisticated in terms of understanding the political process where you've got a weak mayor system; they saw Crombie and figured we've got a reformer now. Crombie made it very clear early on that he was not prepared to repeal by-laws, and it was still left up to the Sewells and Kilbourns and other citizens to race into houses on the Dundas-Sherbourne block to prevent them from being destroyed. And later Crombie went and negotiated the deal to make the thing work. He wasn't in the front line stuff. And it became clear that when he did negotiate he was a lousy negotiator and he gave too much away.

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