

Bill Rea ? It was a time to show grace

I really hadn't planned to write much about the recent passing of former Toronto mayor Rob Ford, but I'm starting to do a burn about the games; mainly political games that are being played in the aftermath.

In particular, the aftermath of the funeral last Wednesday seems to have drawn out the commentators.

It is a fact that I did not attend the funeral, nor had the thought of attending ever occurred to me.

I never met the man. It is true that I used to work in Toronto, and got to know several members of the council in those days. One councillor I used to keep track of is still in office, but I doubt or care if she even remembers me. In terms of political prominence, Ford started his rise some months after I left that job and successfully sought employment elsewhere.

I once attended a function that he was at. I think it was in 2012, and it was one of the prelude events held in anticipation of the upcoming Pan Am Games. Mr. Ford was there, sitting among a group of other dignitaries on the stage at the head table, befitting his status as mayor. I don't recall him playing much of a part in the proceedings. In fact, if memory serves, I don't think he even spoke. He was just there because he was the mayor and that was expected of him.

It was a different matter a couple of years ago when then NDP Leader Jack Layton died. I had known Mr. Layton personally during the time I worked in the city. He was another of the municipal councillors I covered, and I developed considerable respect for the man in the process, despite our political differences. Among other things, he was very good at returning phone calls. Thus, I did think about taking some definite steps to pay my respects at the time, but couldn't get myself down there to do it. I settled for writing words of tribute in this publication, and left it with the feeling that I had somehow come up short, under the circumstances.

The fact is I had no history with the late Mr. Ford, and no reason to attend his final services. There were many, many people with much stronger reasons for attending, and was not prepared to take up seats that they deserved more than I.

Many of those people did attend. That included some of Mr. Ford's colleagues on Toronto City council, and that has sparked a lot of reaction, and that's what bothers me.

First, there was Sue-Ann Levy's column in the Toronto Sun last Thursday, making points that councillors and former councillors who had politically opposed Ford had attended. It was evidently thought that was in poor taste somehow.

If that wasn't enough, City Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti put out a release Friday, pointing out what he calls 'the worst case of hypocrisy' he'd ever seen, referring to those political opponents who were on hand for last Wednesday's services.

It should be pointed out that one of those political opponents has gone on the record as stating he was invited to attend. Assuming that is the case, I'm not sure when other politicians or the media was granted the authority to pass judgment on guest lists.

I think in a situation like that, the rest of us have to leave decisions on whether or not to attend a funeral to those people.

Might it not have been seen in bad taste not to show up at the funeral? Would it not have appeared as though these people were willing to let past quarrels and disagreements rule beyond the grave?

These arguments and differences, whatever they were or amounted to, are finished. To use sports jargon, the referee stepped in and stopped the fight.

If one is going to be in politics, there is the reality that there's going to be an adversarial relationship with some people. There's been a tendency to focus on that, rather than concentrate on the fact that some people are actually capable of showing certain amount of grace, if the situation requires it.

Such grace is usually required when death is involved

I have been following local government in various municipalities for many years. I have come to know many politicians and seen many adversarial relationships. But I've also seen enough arguments that ended when the council passed the motion to adjourn the meeting.

I occasionally bump into one of those former councillors, and he and I discuss old times. He has several times indicated to me that he has no desire to get back into political life, pointing out the councillors today don't seem to understand when to leave 'it' at the table at the end of the meeting; 'it' meaning the animosity.

It is not hypocrisy to pay respects when one has died.

Politics can be a dirty business at just about any level. People sometimes use guile or trickery to get into office, or their supporters use it on their behalf. Over the years, I have seen people get into office who had no business being there, and I have seen others who conduct themselves shamelessly once they are in.

It doesn't matter. If the voters put them into office then they deserve to be there, regardless of what I or anyone else might think, and they are permitted to agree or disagree with their fellows, according to how their good judgment determines. And members of the public (and that includes the media) are expected to do the same.

I never had the chance to vote for Rob Ford as mayor or anything else, and if the opportunity had ever presented itself, I probably wouldn't have.

There have been many positive things written about the man since his death; accolades about his work with and for his constituents, etc. But he was also responsible for a number of disreputable things while in office, up to and including alcohol and drug problems. True, these things can be regarded as illnesses, but a person occupying a high office is under a certain obligation to seek treatment, and Mr. Ford eventually had to be pressured into doing that.

His antics as mayor were also highlighted in a sketch on Saturday Night Live. I made a point of watching it, knowing ahead of time I probably would not be very amused? I wasn't disappointed in that regard.

But it is also a fact that no one deserves the illness that took his life, and the untimely age of 46.

When it came to planning things like funerals, my late mother always took the position that they are to be arranged not for the departed, but for those who are left behind. In this case, that includes Mr. Ford's wife and his two small children, but it also includes former colleagues, among others. It's not a simple case of allowing in those who were nice to him in life. Those who were running events had more important things to worry about.

I also think it was a very bad time to start getting judgmental.

