



SOME GREAT IDEA

Good Neighbourhoods,
Crazy Politics and the
Invention of Toronto

EDWARD KEENAN

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‘A great city, whose image dwells in the memory of man, is the type of some great idea. Rome represents Conquest; Faith hovers over the towers of Jerusalem; and Athens embodies the pre-eminent quality of the antique world, Art. In modern ages, Commerce has created London; while Manners, in the most comprehensive sense of the word, have long found a supreme capital in the airy and bright-minded city of the Seine.’

– Benjamin Disraeli,
Coningsby, or The New Generation

For Rebecca, without whom my idea of Toronto – and most of my other ideas, too – would be a lot less great.

**AN INTRODUCTION:
WHAT DOES TORONTO MEAN?**

1

I have this notion that cities are just a collection of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. At least in part. In a technical sense, a city is a location, a geographic area in which a lot of people live close to each other. And of course a city is also an administrative division that determines how those people manage to get along, or don't. A city is the setting for stories, sure, millions of them, public and private histories, biographies, comedies, tragedies, manifestos. But the city is also a character in those same stories, endowed with a history of its own, personality attributes, motivations and inner conflicts. The city that exists as a living body in our imaginations is not a passive set constructed for its players to act upon, but an active participant in the events that occur within it – its mean streets and cold-hearted bureaucracy frustrate our hopes, its creative impulses

and playful attitude entertain us, its generosity of spirit and inner resolve inspire us and offer us opportunities. And ultimately, a city is a story built from all the English 101 elements your teachers told you to expect: the narratives of New York, Paris, Detroit or Calgary each have an increasingly distinct arc – composed of triumphs and defeats, conflicts resolved and conflicts festering – that suggests to us what the city will do next, how we should interact with it, where it will take us and how it will define itself.

I'm writing here about Toronto, an interesting case and a city that's sometimes defined as much by the brevity of its backstory and its hazy character traits as by its pre-eminence among Canadian urban areas or its agreeable nature. It's a Gatsby among municipalities. And I'm writing about a time – the decade and a half following the 1998 creation of the Toronto 'megacity' – in which the stories Toronto tells itself, and the various subplots lived by the people in it, have refused to converge into a coherent narrative. Under mayors Mel Lastman, David Miller and Rob Ford, Toronto appears to have been several places simultaneously, living separate and often contradictory – even irreconcilable – storylines.

2

To give you an idea of the place as it appeared to me in the middle of the time period I'm talking about, here's one Toronto story. After work on June 15, 2005, a few of us from *Eye Weekly* (a now-defunct alt-weekly that morphed into *The Grid*, where I now work) wandered up through the late-afternoon sunshine to the Ultra Supper Club on Queen Street West for a Tourism Toronto campaign launch party. The room was full of black leather and dark wood and the kind of consciously articulated chuckling and business-card trading you see at a board-of-trade luncheon. Everyone was given logoed baseball caps and umbrellas as, onstage, a series of multi-ethnic dancers unveiled a new branding campaign, a couple years and a couple million dollars in the making. 'Toronto: Unlimited' was the slogan, with the letters *TO* rolled into a single character that looked something like a stylized toilet seat.

My friends and I huddled near the bar, draining glasses of complimentary champagne and snatching tiger shrimp from the trays of passing servers. We cracked wise about the campaign. Maybe the logo looked like a spermatozoa? Was 'Unlimited' supposed to sound as stiff and corporate as it did? Or as generic? In retrospect, it wasn't a half-bad campaign, based on neighbourhood profiles that highlighted Toronto's ethnic enclaves, but it was the era of *No Logo* and anything as self-conscious as a branding campaign seemed worthy of disdain. I was already drafting a snarky editorial in my head as our crowd retired to the rooftop patio to discuss current events and watch the sun set. The federal government under Prime Minister Paul Martin was finally going to insist on passing legislation recognizing same-sex marriages, a gift just in time for the massive Toronto Pride festival coming up a week or so later, and one expected to result in thousands of Americans rushing into town to get hitched at city hall. Meanwhile, it looked like Mayor David Miller, at long last, would persuade the province to grant new powers to the city so it could become a grown-up government. We debated the merits of a 'strong mayor' system; Miller didn't want extraordinary executive power, but I thought maybe he should.

Night was falling and the regular crowd of Bay Streeters started trickling into the bar. I wandered up Beverley Street with Matt Blackett, the publisher of the then-fledgling urbanist magazine *Spacing*, to a converted mansion where a literary magazine party was winding down. A couple of editors there had liberated a bottle of wine from the bar and invited us to enjoy it with them across the street. We sat on a picnic table in Grange Park – just a few hundred metres from where I'd taken piano lessons as a kid – and swigged from the bottle. We could see the new Ontario College of Art & Design building from there, Will Alsop's weird and wonderful tabletop structure that looked like a shoebox floating in the air atop massive, brightly coloured crayons. And we could see the work underway on Frank Gehry's addition to the Art Gallery of Ontario, where a new spiral staircase would face out onto the park. I invited Matt and our new friends to a dance party I was holding in a Queen West bar that week – a few

pals and I had decided we'd like to be nightclub DJs and had started hosting monthly events that, to our surprise, had suddenly become popular. It turned out the literary magazine editors were already planning to attend, and it also turned out we were out of wine, so we all wandered up to Baldwin Street to meet more friends at an Italian restaurant.

On the patio, I ran into my friend David Balzer, an art critic, and we caught up briefly and shared stories of the dozen or more Fringe Festival plays we were each reviewing that week. Inside, a giant banquet table was surrounded by old and new friends, from *Spacing* and the literary magazine, and we drank more wine and ate spaghetti and I spilled tomato sauce down the front of my white shirt and, in the boozy, giddy haze, gradually lost my capacity for creating memories. Eventually Matt and I walked home, heading up Spadina using our new Toronto Unlimited umbrellas as walking sticks, and plotting the ways in which Matt could take over Toronto politics with *Spacing* as a launching pad. We passed the domed glass structures of Dupont subway station and climbed a hill near the railroad tracks. There, Matt showed me how to shut off the lights illuminating the illegally installed billboards that overlooked the streets. If you knew where to look, all you had to do was flip a switch.

And there was a perfect illustration of the sudden influence we felt we could now exert in the city. We were in our early thirties and had magazines and newspapers that would publish our opinions, and friends in seemingly every bar in the city. We were known personally by the mayor and lobbied by activists. If we wanted to have a dance party, we just booked a bar and brought a crate of CDs. And if we saw something we didn't like – like bright lights on a billboard – we'd just go right up and shut it off. Suddenly we knew where the city's switches were.

We parted ways and I staggered another block to the giant loft apartment I shared with my wife, Rebecca. I'd been married for three years and would become a father less than a year later; after spending my twenties taking odd jobs and moving back and forth from my parents' home in Scarborough, I had now spent a couple years earning a living as a professional writer. Rebecca and

I were close to paying off her student loan, and my own adventures in collection-agency dodging were fading into the past. Gay rights were ascendant, marijuana looked as though it might be legalized, a ‘new deal for cities’ had just been announced, the mayor was about to be in the pages of *Vanity Fair*. The economy was booming, and new condo towers were beginning to sprout up all over the place. Toronto was growing higher, bigger, stronger. I was writing an essay about all the activity I saw happening among my loose circle of acquaintances, about this Toronto moment, for an anthology called *uTOpia*. A neat parallel was forming between my own personal narrative and that of my friends, and the narrative of the city’s development. Both seemed to be on an upward trajectory after the fog of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

At home I smoked a cigarette and tried to read for a few minutes before I climbed into bed. Rebecca came in a few hours before the sun rose, her pockets full of tips from her bartending job. She set the alarm and crawled into bed beside me, and as we lay together a train passed on the tracks just behind our building, and the way it gently rattled the floor of our room was comforting. We nodded off to dream big dreams.

Even though I was inclined to take the piss out of Tourism Toronto, it turned out they had it right. For me and Rebecca and our friends and the Toronto we knew and loved, there were no barriers we could see. Our options and our potential, the number of things we could do, be part of, achieve, the dreams we could dream together, the stories we could create, seemed, in a word, unlimited.

3

That’s one story. Here’s another, from a year later, and way out in the part of Etobicoke near the airport, a place some of us might think of as drive-through country, where a man was preaching about a more limited vision of Toronto. That man was a second-term city councillor named Rob Ford.

Just a few months earlier, Councillor Ford had stood in council chambers attacking the \$1.5 million in grants the City of Toronto