



By **SUSAN SHERRING**

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Lots of learning to do Mayor Larry a political work in progress

It's been more than six months since Mayor Larry O'Brien was sworn in, swept to power on a promise of change, while all incumbents were re-elected. What exactly does that mean about what the public wanted?

No one knows for sure.

But the balance between change and maintaining a steady course hasn't been easy for this group of 24.

Council started the term approving a modified version of former mayor Bob Chiarelli's light rail plan, then killed it when the funding wasn't properly in place.

Seven months later, they're no further ahead, though O'Brien fulfilled a promise to set up a task force to come up with a new plan. The report is done, but we're light years away from having anything solid in place.

On top of that, the city is now facing a \$175-million lawsuit from the Siemens consortium which was initially awarded the contract, then had the rug pulled out from under it.

On the financial front, council came close to bringing in a tax freeze, but still hiked user fees.

Much of council's time over the past few weeks was dominated by O'Brien's plans for transforming the way business is done at City Hall.

Can you see a difference?

So, what makes a good municipal politician?

That's easy. Good councillors who work hard for their constituents, but who also understand they're not just ward councillors and must also work as team players for the good of the entire city.

So, who makes the grade, and who needs to spend more time doing their homework? Here's how your city council stacks up:

LARRY O'BRIEN

Mayor

C-

O'Brien won the hearts and votes of Ottawans who liked his pledges to kill light rail and freeze taxes.

But it seems voters are already less enamoured with O'Brien than when they paid a visit to the polls.

Small wonder. His efforts are hit-and-miss. And despite some tough talk, his office continues to be dogged by the ongoing OPP investigation, with councillors now engaging in lots of backroom gossip about who could replace O'Brien, if necessary.

There are signs everywhere that O'Brien is failing to grasp that without building alliances with both staff and council, he's just one vote without much more influence than any other councillor around the table. If he doesn't soon get that concept, he's doomed to failure.

Make no mistake about it, the charm is still there by the bucket. But O'Brien ran without any real vision for the city and still doesn't seem to have one.

He relies on his handlers too often to dictate when he can talk and what he should say. Is he afraid of the media, or do his handlers believe he'll misspeak?

MEDIA GUY

Want to know what he thinks about an issue? That's routinely handled by his "media guy" Mike Patton -- the only one in his office with any municipal experience.

And chief-of-staff Walter Robinson, who came on board and promised to stay in the background, also regularly spoke on O'Brien's behalf. With Robinson's exit, the mayor needs to act quickly to find someone to revamp the office and gain control at City Hall.

The mayor is obviously continuing to learn as he goes, though there are some broken election promises lying in his path.

Still not used to the shenanigans that go on at council, O'Brien showed his frustration recently, referring to some of the game-playing as "crap."

No doubt he sometimes looks back fondly on the days when being the boss meant you actually got to dictate policy.

"It's a lot easier to make money in this city than it is to be involved in municipal politics," O'Brien said recently.

Georges Bedard

Rideau-Vanier

B+

Bedard is a strong councillor who is kept hopping in his downtown ward.

He's not afraid to ruffle feathers when that's called for, but doesn't waste time -- as so many of his colleagues do -- looking for ways to stab his fellow councillors in the back.

He knows when to speak at council, and when he does talk, he almost always makes sense -- even when you don't buy into his left-leaning way of thinking.

Michel Bellemare

Beacon Hill-Cyrville

C-

Michel who? When Bellemare announced he was seeking the Liberal nomination in the federal riding of Ottawa-Orleans, it created barely a ripple. Could it have been few felt his absence would be noticed? There are some signs that Bellemare knows his stuff, but he needs to step up to the plate and share it with the rest of us.

Rainer Bloess

Innes

B+

A senior city councillor, Bloess sat on the sidelines as the chairs of the committees were being chosen, willing to let others carry the burden of leadership, seemingly content to sit back and watch his colleagues self-destruct.

That's too bad. His leadership could have been used this term. But he continues to be the media's darling by always making himself readily available, knowledgeable and articulate. Being bilingual doesn't hurt either.

Bloess learned who his friends were when he missed out on an important light-rail vote while on a cruise.

His misstep was greeted with virtual cries of delight from some on council who feel Bloess gets an easy ride in the media. What they fail to realize is the councillor is hard-working, knows his stuff -- and has a strong vision for both his ward and the city. That's hard to come by.

Glenn Brooks

Rideau-Goulbourn

C+

Brooks does lots of things right at council.

To his great credit, he's one of the few who doesn't engage in the nonsense that so often takes place between city councillors -- like taking credit where it isn't due -- or stabbing backs that aren't covered.

But to rise above the pack, Brooks is going to have to use what he knows from his years of serving municipal voters to sway fellow councillors.

That doesn't appear to be about to happen anytime soon.

Rick Chiarelli

College

C+

This councillor is still finding his way under the new regime. He got overlooked when the important committee chairs and influential committee members were being chosen by O'Brien and council. That's too bad, he has a lot to offer, and a dry wit to boot. He's not afraid to speak his mind, and that's a good thing. Still, he needs to put his considerable know-how to better use in serving the city instead of grumbling on the sidelines.

Alex Cullen

Bay

B-

Cullen is quite likely the hardest-working councillor when it comes to city-wide issues. He spends countless hours researching issues and working on policy he believes is good for all -- but it often ends up looking like needless meddling. Though he does care about doing the right thing for both his ward and the city, Cullen continues to fail to meet his potential because his tactics get in the way of real progress.

At times, it seems there's a mean streak in Cullen, seeming to take delight in pointing out other's political or personal misfortune.

Eli El-Chantiry

West Carleton-March

B

This hard-working councillor seems to be having trouble adjusting to the new regime. Originally shafted out of a spot on the Police Services Board at the start of the session, the former police chair appeared to be having

difficulty getting over his bitterness. O'Brien has now thrown him a bone -- and given the rural councillor his spot on the board.

El-Chantiry has grown by leaps and bounds since he was first elected last term. Unlike some of his fellow rural councillors, El-Chantiry has an understanding of the needs of the entire city, but never forgets who elected him.

Diane Deans

Gloucester-Southgate

B

While some of her colleagues sit back and complain behind the mayor's back, Deans -- a staunch feminist -- isn't afraid to take on Mayor Larry O'Brien when she feels the need, and is making her mark as the official opposition. She protects her ward's interests, but is also thoughtful when it comes to guiding the city into the future. However, she does have to accept light rail is dead if she really wants to help move the city ahead. She recently tried to secure the provincial Liberal nomination in Ottawa Centre, but it wasn't to be. It's time Deans stopped testing the political waters elsewhere and do what she does best. That's representing the municipal voters in Ottawa. Her residents need to know they come first.

Clive Doucet

Capital

C

Doucet wore his heart on his sleeve during the light-rail debate and his passion on the issue garnered him admirers. Looking like a man defeated, Doucet appeared close to tears when the project went down in flames.

But by his own admission, Doucet sometimes appears to be on a much different planet than the rest of council. And while everyone doesn't have to be cut from the same cloth, until he finds a way to sell his point of view to the rest of council, he's going to continue to be nothing more than a lone voice in the wilderness.

Peggy Feltmate

Kanata South

B-

Who knew Feltmate was revving up to stand tough against O'Brien? A staunch supporter of failed mayoral candidate Alex Munter, Feltmate recently left one of O'Brien's transformation meetings in frustration. She's made it clear she won't sit back and watch city services deteriorate and, as such, isn't a fan of the mayor's commitment to freeze taxes for the full term of council.

Jan Harder

Barrhaven

B

Harder continues to march to the beat of her own drum and that apparently is just how her constituents like her. She works with dogged determination on their behalf -- and has lots of ideas for the city as well. As is her way, she's thrown herself into her new role as head of the library board. If she wants to become more of a leader on council, she'll have to cut down on the complaining about what her colleagues are or aren't doing and remain focused on the tasks at hand. That's when she's at her best.

Diane Holmes

Somerset

B

Here's another councillor with so much to offer, but sometimes her tactics get the better of her.

One of the few with a strong city vision, she's intelligent, knowledgeable, and takes her job seriously but she can be absolutely cutting in her public assessment of some of her colleagues -- which isn't likely to bring any support from the council table.

Peter Hume

Alta Vista

A-

The gold star goes to Hume, who finds himself at the top of the council class. After years of representing Alta Vista, it seems he's finally come into his own, perhaps now that he's no longer feeling pressure from Bob Chiarelli. Hume knows his stuff, is a strong chair at the helm of the city's planning committee and has shone sitting in for O'Brien chairing city council. O'Brien, perhaps hearing rumours that Hume has his eye on the mayor's chair, seems to have soured on him. But Hume is proving he's not going to let that stop him from working on the business at hand.

Gord Hunter

Knoxdale-Merivale

B-

It's easy to believe Hunter could do his job with his hands tied behind his back. One of council's longest serving politicians, he's a wealth of information about what's been tried and failed, and what worked.

Rob Jellett

Cumberland

B-

Here's another councillor who is beginning to shine without Chiarelli's pressure tactics in his face.

He balances the interests of his ward -- a mix of urban and rural -- and usually avoids the rural whine council is too often witness to. An articulate speaker when he chooses, Jellett is continuing to grow in his role around the council table.

Jacques Legendre

Rideau-Rockcliffe

C-

Legendre continues to fail to understand that berating city staff publicly doesn't win friends or influence people. Councillors have been tuning him out for years, can staff be far behind?

Maria McRae

River

D

It hasn't been a good six months for McRae. Her reputation took a big hit when it was revealed she'd been

meeting with Seimens behind closed doors talking about their strategy to sue the city over the failed light rail project.

A catty councillor eager to diss her colleagues, McRae lost even more credibility when she suggested council should have a dress code around the council table. So rarely actually sitting at the council table, how would she even know what her colleagues are wearing?

Her image took another beating when she called on the city to see if the Sens could pay for part of the security costs incurred during the Stanley Cup playoffs.

And then there's the revolving door in her office. Small wonder.

Her colleagues are still shaking their heads in wonderment at how McRae had the gall to question city staff attending Sens' playoff games, when she herself watched the same game in Waste Management's suite. This councillor should stop talking conspiracy theories against her. She's quickly losing all credibility.

Bob Monette

Orleans

B

There's something so incredibly likable about Monette, a hard-working ward councillor with a vision for the city. What's not to like? He has respect for the system, doesn't engage in the silliness around him, and just continues to grow in his role around the council table.

Shad Qadri

Stittsville-Kanata West

B

One of the brightest lights of the new crop of councillors, Qadri hasn't demonstrated any visible signs of being a newcomer. Strong around council table, he's not wasting any time making his mark -- he thinks quickly on his feet, quickly grasps the issues and is media-friendly.

Qadri seems to have immediately understood the importance of being both a city councillor and a politician responsible for meeting the needs of his particular ward.

He's broken out a strong pack of newcomers and is the brightest light of a new group of strong newbies.

Of course, having replaced former Goulbourn mayor Janet Stavinga, Qadri had nowhere to go but up.

Doug Thompson

Osgoode

C-

Is he likeable? Absolutely. Does he represent the interests of Osgoode residents? You betcha. Are there any signs he takes his role as a citywide councillor seriously? None that are discernible.

Marianne Wilkinson

Kanata

B-

Steve Desroches

Gloucester-Southgate

B-

Christine Leadman

Kitchissippi

B-

It's an impressive group of newcomers -- who are already proving themselves around council. There have been no major stumbles from this trio, who seem to be finding their way under the heavy workload, familiarizing themselves with the comings and goings at city hall.

They're taking their time to learn the ropes and the issues -- and you can expect all three to continue to shine in the months to come, particularly Wilkinson, who is impressing everyone with her grasp of the issues -- no doubt in large part because of her years of municipal experience representing Kanata.