MAYOR ROB FORD: UNCONTROLLABLE

By Mark Towhey, Former Chief of Staff for Rob Ford, and Johanna Schneller

His First Addiction

I pulled up outside Rob's house about ten minutes early. It was September 15, 2010 – a Wednesday. I'd told him we should leave at 4:30 to be across town for the 6:30 PM debate. I was always early, because he was always late.

Both Rob's beat-up, filthy Chrysler Uplander van and his wife Renata's blue economy sedan were in the driveway, so he was home. That was a good sign. The curtains were closed. That was normal. The Fords were a private family, and their home was a place few staff or outsiders ever entered. Even glimpses through the windows were rare, usually only when one of the kids was peeking out.

His house was a modest bungalow with a roof that needed repair. It was the first, and by far the cheapest looking, house on a street that was now lined with much bigger, much nicer homes that had quickly escalated into the multi-million dollar range. If you Googled his address, you'd assume the Ford home was on millionaire's row – which it was. But, as I sat looking at it from my truck across the street, where he could see me if he glanced out the window, it looked like a place your minimum-wage gardener might live in if you were really rich. I popped the lid open on my Tim Horton's Double-Double, and waited.

Getting a politician into the zone for a public appearance, especially an all-candidates debate, was a lot like getting a comedian pumped up before a gig.

Politicians are performers, after all. Massive egos. Always craving positive feedback. And Rob was especially tricky. For a politician, he was surprisingly shy. Show most pols a camera, and they'll automatically turn into the light to get on TV. Not Rob. He dreaded public speaking and felt he was terrible at it. He told me that his words got jumbled up and never came out the way he'd intended. He was only comfortable in small groups of constituents, or one-on-one on the phone.

Although there were over forty other candidates for mayor, there were really only seven contenders: Ford; George Smitherman, who was the race leader and popular favorite; Rocco Rossi, who was the establishment's second and more conservative choice; Joe Pantalone, the last-minute, left-wing substitute candidate for Adam Giambrone, who had withdrawn following a minor sex scandal; Giorgio Mammoliti, a maverick long-shot city councillor; and Sarah Thompson, a political neophyte who was added to the contenders by the media in order to include a female candidate.

All but Ford were polished public speakers who loved attention and would speak until they were cut off. They prided themselves on being smart, well-spoken and able to answer any question with a thoughtful, articulate response tailored to the unique nature of each audience. Ironically, that would be their downfall.

I didn't knock on Rob's door. I didn't phone the house. No one knocked on the door except as a last resort. No one ever called the house.

Never. Only his closest, longest-serving and most trusted staffers had ever been in the house. In the three years I would ultimately work for Ford, I would step inside his home exactly twice. Both times during a crisis.

Rob said Renata didn't like people coming to the door. She didn't like people calling the house. She must have hated the fact that, every day, Rob gave out his home telephone number on hundreds of fridge magnets. He handed them out to people on the street, pressed them into the hands of TV and radio interviewers, distributed them throughout the corridors of Toronto's City Hall, which perched like a spaceship on a large square at the corner of Queen and Bay streets. But Renata couldn't stop him. No one could. It was a Rob Ford thing, another of the eccentricities I was learning about as the campaign went on.

I glanced through the debate book I'd prepared for the evening. It was a debate at Burrows Hall Community Centre in Scarborough – the eastern third of Toronto. Hosted by a local residents' association, the event was scheduled to go three hours. It would hot. It would be gruelling. Far too long. There would be many questions from residents, about the same issues important to residents in every other debate. Each candidate would roll out the same answers they'd practiced for months.

We'd done over two dozen debates already and there were sixty or seventy to go in the remaining two months of the mayoral campaign. Rob was a difficult politician to brief. It had taken a great deal of trial and error to figure out how to get him prepared.

He had no real interest in policy beyond his broadly stated goals, which he repeated over and over: Lower taxes. Cut the vehicle tax and the land transfer tax. Cut the waste. Cut the size of council. Cut councillors' budgets. It was his mantra, and he intoned it like a Zen master.

I also wondered if he had attention deficit disorder -- it was very hard to keep him focused on debate prep for more than a few minutes at a time. We'd start, but in a minute he'd be answering his phone; or remembering some trivial detail he wanted Enzo, the handyman at City Hall, to take care of; or running old bills and junk mail through the shredder beside his desk (man, he loved that shredder), and I'd have to guide him back.

During the month I'd been working for him, however, I'd come up with a system that seemed to work. I would always chauffeur him to the debates so I could squeeze in prep along the way. I'd bought a fancy-looking, leather-bound three-ring binder at Staples and filled it with plastic slip-in sheets. For each of the debates, I'd work with the organizers, get a list of the questions they would ask (if they were willing to share), or the topics they were interested in (if not). I'd prepare a standard package in the binder he could take on stage with him.

First page: List of the place, time, name of the group hosting the debate, and names of key people he'd meet.

Second page: List of his key campaign messages.

Pages 3-5: List of the questions they'd ask and three or four talking points for each, bridging back to his key messages.

Back pages: any background material which may be useful, including copies of his campaign literature he could hold up as a prop.

The final ingredient was Rob Ford's secret weapon – his security blanket, without which he was unsettled and unfocused. He'd misplaced it often enough that I'd learned to make multiple copies and stash them everywhere. There was one tucked into the front of the binder. There was one in a slip case at the back of the binder. There was one in his pocket and two or three in my suit pockets as well as an envelope of twenty in my truck.

The security blanket was a single-page printout of every motion he'd put forward in his ten years as a city councillor, how much money it would have saved, and what the vote count was. For example, he'd put forward a motion to save $77,000 by having councillors water their own plants in City Hall, and another to save $80,000 by discontinuing the handout of free cigarettes and booze in homeless shelters. While other politicians focused on the $9 billion operating budget, Ford drew people's attention to the small-scale waste that enraged voters, like eliminating free golf passes for city politicians. Nobody could conceive of a billion dollars – it was a number with too many zeroes. No one knew whether $9 billion was too much or too little to pay to run a city. But everyone knew exactly how much they were paid each year and how hard they worked to earn it. So when they heard Ford say that someone was getting almost $80,000 to *water plants,* they were outraged. When one of his opponents corrected his numbers, it only got better.

"Rob, you know you're wrong," Joe Pantalone would say. He'd go on to explain the woman who waters plants in Councillors' offices was a botanist who also cared for the plants in Nathan Phillips Square – City Hall's main public plaza – and she only made $55,000.

The audience would howl: *$55,000!!! That's ridiculous!* Rob Ford was the only candidate who agreed with them. From that moment, they'd be his.

"This is gold, buddy. Gold," he'd told me on many occasions. Rob called almost everyone "Buddy." He had no real friends and was awkward with strangers, so it was his way of deputizing people around him, building a bond with them. And it worked. Tens of thousands of people in Toronto felt they had a personal relationship with Rob Ford. Calling people "Buddy" also helped when you forgot someone's name.

At 4:30, there was no movement in Rob's house, so I called his cell phone. It went straight to voice mail. Not good – that meant it was switched off. Was he ready? Was he even awake? Ford was a nocturnal creature, so he would often nap during the afternoon. I waited a few minutes and called again. Still off.

At 4:40, I got out of the car to knock on the door. This was a last-ditch measure and not something I looked forward to. On my way across the street, I called again. Reprieve: this time he answered.

"Yeah?" Typically curt, when he was on the receiving end of a staff call.

"Hi Boss, I'm parked outside," I said. "Boss" was my version of "buddy." I didn't want to call him Rob, which he preferred. He was a client, not a friend. He was an elected councillor, but calling him Councillor felt awkward in private. So I'd settled on Boss. "We should get going, it's after 4:30."

"OK. I'll be out in ten minutes." Click.

About eight minutes later, the door opened and Rob walked out to his van. As always, he was wearing a dark blue suit with a blue shirt and patterned tie. He didn't look great. His shirt was wet from where he'd brushed his teeth and splashed water on his face. The collar was splayed wide, the shirt clearly too small. Pretty much everyone who ever saw Rob had suggested that we get him better quality suits. But the suits weren't the problem: They were always high-end, from Harry Rosen, $1,200 to $2,000 each, and tailored. But stuff a one-litre bottle of root beer into one jacket pocket, 500 business cards and fridge magnets in the other, and Rob Ford in the middle, and there's only so much any suit can do.

I pulled my red Ford Explorer around in a U-turn and stopped behind Rob's van on the edge of his driveway so he could hop into my truck without walking through the dirt on the boulevard. I jumped out and stood behind him as he rustled through a pile of papers in his van. There were always papers in the van. Everything Rob did was on paper: schedules, printed out two or three times a day. Call lists, produced daily. These were scattered around under the usual piles of crumpled McDonald's wrappers and Happy Meal toys.

"Where's my call sheets?" he asked. His precious call sheets. He never went anywhere without them. We spent a few minutes locating them, then climbed into my truck. I reminded him to take off his suit jacket and hang it on the back of his seat to avoid wrinkles. Later on, I would learn to carry a spare coat hanger. By now it was nearly 5 PM.

"I need to stop at the Esso," Rob said. Another part of his pre-debate routine. I pulled onto the road and drove 150 meters up the street and into the Esso gas station parking lot. There was a Tim Horton's counter inside and Rob always bought a French Vanilla coffee and a copy of the Toronto Sun.

While he was inside, I phoned Nick Kouvalis and told him that we were moving and that we'd be cutting it close. I'd call again to alert him when we were nearby, so that he'd be standing outside when we pulled up, to walk Rob in and help him glad-hand the crowd until I could park and catch up. Rob always wanted to just walk in on his own. He was not used to being handled or managed by staff. But I was an ex-Army officer, Nick was ex-military and an experienced campaign manager. We insisted on planning and protocol.

Rob heaved himself back into my Explorer, and rolled down the window. Though I'd put his seat all the way back, the car was always a close fit for him. No matter how hot or cold it was outside, he'd roll the window down so his elbow could rest on the sill, giving him some breathing space. By the time I turned onto Scarlett Road, he was already on the phone. Everywhere we went,

any time of the day or evening, no matter what else I'd be trying to communicate to him, he was always working that damn call sheet.

It didn't look like much – just an 8 ½ by 11-inch sheet of plain paper, with phone numbers scribbled in two columns on each side. The numbers were taken, by hand, from his home phone's Caller ID window. When constituents would use those magnets Rob gave out and actually phone his house, they'd leave a message -- twenty to two hundred calls a night, depending on what he had been doing the day before. No one at the Ford house ever listened to the voicemails, but every call logged into the Caller ID would be written on a plain white piece of paper by Rob himself, or by his Executive Assistant, who'd been with him for years, and was one of the few staffers trusted enough to enter his house. Twenty-five numbers per side. Fifty per sheet. And every one of those calls, he would return. Personally. That was his trademark, his brand – his promise. People loved it, he was sure of that.

As we drove, he'd sit with the paper in his left hand, and his flip phone and a pen -- usually my pen -- in his right. He'd stab the numbers into the phone with his chubby index finger and wait.

Usually, he got voicemail. "This is Rob Ford, returning your call," he'd say. "If I can help you, please call my office at 416 -397-9255. That's 416-397-9255. If I'm not there, you can talk to one of my staff and they'll help you out." He'd put a big check mark next to the number, and dial the next.

When there was no answer and no voicemail, he'd get annoyed. "Who doesn't have a machine?" he'd grumble. "How am I supposed to call you back if you don't have a machine?"

I'd give him time to make a few calls before beginning the briefing. At the first red light, I'd hand him the binder to go over the gist of the debate: who was sponsoring it, where it was, who would be there, and what the issues were. Often, they were small: too much traffic turning left onto one street because there was a no-right-turn prohibition on another, that kind of thing. We'd get through a few details, then he'd clear his throat and spit a large hunk of phlegm out the window. He'd done that so often I'd gotten over the grotesqueness of it. But you really didn't want to be sitting in the back seat behind him when he did it. Afterward, he'd punch out another number on the phone and I'd have to wait for a few more calls before continuing the brief.

About one out of every five numbers, he'd connect with someone. Often, they had no idea who he was. I'd only ever hear half the phone call. "Hi, this is Rob Ford returning your call," he'd say, followed by, "Rob Ford, City Councillor for Ward 2. I'm running for mayor." Beat. "Well, someone from this number called me. Is this 416-555-5555? Well, then someone called me and left a message." Beat. "Okay, well, if I can help you out in any way let me know. Have a good night."

But then, every tenth call or so, he'd strike gold. He'd connect with someone who was thrilled to hear his voice. Someone who loved him, and would tell him so.

"Yes, this is really Rob Ford. It's me," he'd say, a big grin on his face. They'd explain their problem and he'd promise to help.

"Is it your tree, or your neighbour's tree? Uh-huh," he'd say, scribbling a note on the call sheet. "Do you know if it's privately owned or is it on city property?" Then he'd pull his calendar -- also on paper -- out of his breast pocket, and unfold it on my dash board. Squinting, he'd look at the week ahead. "Will you be home Thursday?" he'd ask. "Thursday at, say, 10 o'clock?" Beat. "Good. I'll be at your house on Thursday at 10 o'clock with city staff and we'll sort it out. No problem. I'm happy to help. I don't mean to be rude, but I gotta let you go now. Bye."

He'd hang up, scribble a note down on his calendar, and stab his phone to reach his own office line, where he'd get his assistant's voicemail. "Katie, it's Rob Ford," he'd say – his full name, every time, like he had to remind her of who he was. "I need MLS and Forestry at (address) on Thursday at 10 AM. Set it up." He'd check that number off his call sheet, and move on to the next.

Every time that happened, he'd say to me, "Ten votes, right there." He'd sound happy, sure of himself. "That's all there is to it, man," he'd tell me. "Returning people's calls. That's what you gotta do. They tell their family. They tell their friends. That's ten votes. It's gold."

After a few weeks of this, I learned not to fight the calls. I learned to work between them. As we closed in on the venue, after every third or fourth call, I'd interject and draw his attention back to the binder. We'd cover one talking point, or one way to deflect an opponent's assault, and then I'd wait while he dialed another few numbers.

By the time we pulled up at the Community Center that evening, I'd covered all the critical points for the debate, while he'd dialed thirty numbers, left ten messages, talked to six people, and soaked up some love from three or four of them -- just enough to build up his enormous yet eggshell-fragile ego for the clash of the debate. Later, I'd observe that whenever he was pressed or cornered, or there was a crisis in progress, he'd default back to his call list. Madly dialing. Looking for positive reinforcement in the praise of strangers. I called it "dialing for love."

Much later -- after he'd won the election, after his first year as Mayor, after his behaviour had become increasingly unpredictable – I'd watch as he struggled with other, more dangerous addictions. But, from the beginning of our time together, his first addiction was love.