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Time to end meddling at the TTC

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Illustrations: Color Photo: Tyler Anderson, National Post Files / Councillor Karen Stintz is the designated chairwoman of the TTC. The key to making the transit commission function well, Chris Selley says, is not how it's structured, but that it exercises its proper oversight role while letting management do its job.;

Richard Soberman, former chairman of the civil engineering department at the University of Toronto, makes a fairly compelling argument to rid the Toronto Transit Commission of politicians and replace them with people with skills, rather than biases, hobby horses and constituencies to please.

"Directors should be experts in a number of areas, such as transit, engineering, finance, law, accounting, construction, project management and urban planning," he wrote in a study commissioned by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario and released this week -- "expertise that is unlikely to be represented in any one group of elected officials."

"Executive oversight, not micro-management," he writes in the study, should be the role of entities like the TTC. "You do not get objectivity from people who are looking for photo-ops," he told the Post this week.

Certainly, micro-management has been a common complaint about the TTC. Outgoing chairman Adam Giambrone often served as media point man for purely operational issues, putting a needlessly political face on day-to-day affairs. He and Mayor David Miller were on a transit mission, fair enough. But it's as if an arts reporter called up CBC with a question about the new season of *Being Erica* and was forwarded to the chairman of the board, Timothy Casgrain. Never heard of him? I hadn't either, actually. That's sort of the point.

We don't think of politicians policing, cleaning or repairing Yonge Street -- just being accountable that it functions. Why should it be any different for the Yonge subway line?

There are obvious benefits to depoliticizing the TTC, and they come with a lot of zeroes at the end of them. For example: Mr. Giambrone's predecessor, Howard Moscoe, along with Mr. Miller, were the public faces of the notorious sole-sourced subway car deal with Bombardier. Former TTC general manager Rick Ducharme wanted to put it out to tender, as you'd expect. It's nice to help Thunder Bay if you can, but it's a dog-eat-dog world out there for people running businesses. Most cities have realized that by now.

Mr. Ducharme ended up resigning over political interference not just in the subway deal, but Mr. Moscoe's freelance negotiations with the transit union during the wildcat strike in 2006. Mr. Miller stood by Mr. Moscoe's interventionist tendencies. But

surely union relations are tough enough without politicians -- who trail union endorsements behind them like tin cans on a wedding limousine -- poking their beaks in whenever the urge strikes them. Their motives are too multifarious to trust.

All that said, the most important things about transit -- what kinds of vehicles go where and how often -- are going to remain in the hands of politicians, one way or the other. And that's as it should be, really.

There's no objective truth when it comes to these things. Mr. Miller, Mr. Giambrone and I like the Transit City plan, and (with reservations in my case) streetcars. Mr. Ford doesn't; he wants to ditch Transit City in favour of subways, pending approval from another politician, Dalton McGuinty. Mr. Ford's incoming TTC chairwoman, Karen Stintz, has expressed similar skepticism about Transit City in the past -- though she has grudgingly supported the Eglinton LRT, which would disappear altogether if Mr. Ford had his druthers.

The key here, it seems to me, is less the structure of the commission than its willingness to exercise its proper oversight role and let management do its damn job. That is what Mr. Ford should expect of his appointees-- whoever they are.

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