

The Nenshi Years

Taking stock of the purple wave

By CHRIS TURNER

FIND IT EASY TO FORGET WHAT CALGARY was like when it all began—before what I’ll call the Nenshi Years. It feels like a lifetime ago, several political epochs back. Before the pandemic, before the Olympic bid, before the flood. Before the boom—and whole boom–bust cycle—ended. Before the PC collapse and NDP’s surprise supernova, before Jason Kenney’s rise and rise and ongoing splat.

Before all of that: 2007. The political baseline then, in Calgary as in the province as a whole, was stagnation. Government as a series of shrugs and self-congratulations. Who remembers what Dave Bronconnier, the last person to sit in the mayor’s chair, stood for? What his vision for the city was? Who remembers what voting in the 2007 municipal election? (I do. It was a pointless errand en route to something more worthwhile, like dropping payment for a gas bill in the mail. We used to do that too, then, not so long ago—pay our bills by mail.) In 2007 the incumbent mayor’s only serious opposition was a multi-millionaire dogged by rumours of shady business dealings in Kenya who bought a little more than 10 per cent of the vote. Incumbents were returned in 9 of the 12 wards, two of them by acclamation.

Does it overstate the case to say no one really cared in 2007? Voter turnout was 33 per cent. It had been even lower in the 2004 election. Maybe it doesn’t even overstate it to say no one cared about municipal politics the whole decade.

It certainly felt like no one cared. I was doing research back then for a small group called Sustainable Calgary, and the consensus among municipal-level progressive non-profits was that the problem wasn’t a lack of non-profits producing reports full of good ideas but a yawning chasm between ideas and implementation. Civic engagement seemed all but

non-existent. And so a bunch of us got together to create a little conference called CivicCamp to try to figure out how to overcome the inertia of municipal politics, and one of the people who helped organize it was a civic-minded business prof from Mount Royal University named Naheed Nenshi. And nothing was the same in Calgary politics after that.

So, yes, let’s be clear about the baseline. The baseline was a shrug, a yawn, a backroom deal, a 20-year neighbourhood development permit after half an hour of idle debate. And let’s be clear as well that the change following the 2010 municipal election was seismic. However anyone might rate the Nenshi years in Calgary, there is no denying they were the Nenshi years.

That’s how it began—the first flush of optimism in a roaring boomtown. A great purple wave carried a candidate who initially polled nearly at zero to victory in a 2010 campaign that used youth and diversity and newfangled social media to wash over the city’s inertia and land its man in the mayor’s chair. It ends this year, amid great anxiety, in a busted boomtown reeling from the pandemic, a city whose political climate feels some days like a toxic cloud. In early April Nenshi announced he wouldn’t seek a fourth term. “There are many voices that haven’t always felt heard,” he said, “and it felt like the right time to make some room.”

I’m not at all objective on this subject, to be clear. Nenshi is not a close enough friend that we share confidences—I learned he wasn’t running again, as anyone else might, when the news broke on Twitter—but he is close enough that he’s handed me a gift of his mother’s excellent samosas in my living room and it feels a little odd referring to him as Nenshi, per journalistic convention, and not Naheed, as I’ve



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TOP: Calgary’s new mayor Naheed Nenshi speaks to the media the day after being elected to the office, Oct 19, 2010. **BOTTOM:** University of Calgary student Nenshi arguing against the abolishment of corporate support for universities, while his debating partner, Ezra Levant, listens, 1992.

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