

Another Chow waiting in the wings [CA-ON] ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 30 Jan 2006

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

They are the women who would be Chow.

Janet Davis, Shelley Carroll and Maria Augimeri - three left-wing Toronto councillors likely, city hall insiders say, to inherit the role Olivia Chow vacated when she finally vaulted into Parliament last week.

For years, Chow has been Toronto's child and youth advocate, charged with championing social programs for the city's youngest and most vulnerable citizens. But she was so much more than her title suggests.

Chow was a political, administrative and media dynamo, who cut through red tape and ideological lines to get things done, found creative ways to fund social programs and showed a knack for getting attention - though some argue she courted it a bit too ardently.

In any case, she wore big shoes, and around city hall there is a consensus it will take a team to fill them. "No one can be Olivia Chow," Davis (Ward 31, Beaches-East York) said last week.

To that end, city council is splitting up Chow's old job, giving the children's portfolio to Davis and the youth file to Carroll at a time when each issue is at a critical juncture.

The city needs millions in funding from a federal-provincial agreement to open thousands of child-care spots. That is in jeopardy under a new federal government led by the Conservatives, who vowed to give daycare cash directly to parents.

Davis knows the issue well. She was responsible for school-based child care at the former Toronto Board of Education for more than 20 years and served as a trustee before being elected to council in 2003.

"This is my field," she said.

The rookie councillor is strong on policy - she was an early proponent of the integrated early-childhood education model favoured by the city - but she is still short on political experience and acknowledged the impossibility of measuring up to her predecessor.

"I'll be myself," she said.

While Davis helped engineer many changes in the city's child-care policy - like wage subsidies for daycare workers to ease parents' costs - part of her challenge will be replicating Chow's effectiveness in the council chamber.

Chow was at the height of her powers in December when she scored a characteristic - but unusually quiet - win on child care. She secured \$3.7 million for an after-school program without a peep from her fiscally conservative council colleagues. The money came from a pot Chow helped put aside a year earlier, at budget time.

She also displayed another one of her strengths in the December victory: consensus-building. Chow reached across the ideological divide to persuade right-wing councillors like Giorgio Mammoliti that funding social programs is good politics.

As Chow departs, though, there may also be less pressure on council to take the lead on social issues than at any time since amalgamation. The reason: Left-wing Mayor David Miller is a powerful proponent of so many of the same causes Chow championed. His defence of the federal-provincial child-care agreement, which secured those thousands of daycare spots now in doubt, became a refrain during the federal campaign. And Toronto's year-long gun violence crisis has put youth issues at the top of his agenda.

Finally, Chow herself is not lost to Toronto. As the New Democratic Party looks to build on its successes from the last Parliament - securing billions in federal funds for such city priorities as transit - she and husband Jack Layton, the party's leader, will be the city's most dynamic mouthpieces in years on Parliament Hill.

"Toronto still has Olivia Chow as an advocate," Davis said. "We have her in Ottawa, where we need her more than ever."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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