

THE INCUMBENT TEST

Susan Stevenson: From Councillor to Mayor

I've spent much of this election trying to understand not only what candidates are promising, but how we should judge those who already hold public office.

That sounds easier than it is.

A politician may advocate for something without possessing the authority to deliver it. Governments can spend more money without improving outcomes. A problem can become worse even while a particular intervention is working. And sometimes the most important causes of a problem lie completely outside municipal jurisdiction.

So I've developed what I'm calling **The Incumbent Test**.

It asks:

What was the problem?

Who actually had the authority to address it?

What did the politician say?

What did they do?

What resources were committed?

What did government deliver?

What actually changed?

What did we learn?

I'm applying it first to two incumbents running for mayor: Susan Stevenson and Josh Morgan.

They present very different tests. Stevenson has served as one councillor among fifteen. Now she's asking Londoners to give her considerably greater power.

So the central question isn't simply whether we agree with her positions. It's:

What does her record as a councillor tell us about how she might govern as mayor?

A councillor cannot run the city

Fairness requires starting here. Stevenson couldn't implement an agenda by herself during the last Council term.

A councillor can introduce motions, propose amendments, question administration, advocate publicly and vote. Most significant decisions require the support of Council.

And many of London's largest problems aren't primarily municipal at all.

So it would be unfair to take everything Stevenson said in 2022 and ask:

Why didn't you deliver it?

She didn't possess that authority.

Nor was everything she said a promise. Her campaign contained specific proposals, policy positions, priorities and a broader vision for London. Those distinctions matter.

There is considerable consistency in her record

One thing becomes clear when Stevenson's 2022 positions are compared with her record and her 2026 campaign.

She has remained remarkably persistent on many of the same issues. She has continued challenging London's approach to homelessness and addiction. She has advocated greater emphasis on treatment, recovery, enforcement and measurable outcomes. She has consistently pushed for fiscal restraint and greater scrutiny of municipal spending. She has advocated additional police resources and greater attention to public safety. She has continued raising questions about transit, downtown conditions and civic administration.

She has often found herself outside the Council majority. That doesn't tell us whether her positions were right or wrong.

But it does answer one part of the Incumbent Test:

Did Stevenson use the authority she possessed to pursue the things she told voters mattered to her?

On a number of her central issues, the evidence says yes.

The more important question is what happens when advocacy becomes executive leadership.

The tax promise changes everything

Stevenson's 2022 position was broadly to find efficiencies and keep property taxes low.

Her 2026 commitment is dramatically more specific.

She says she will bring forward budgets with municipal property-tax increases **below one per cent in 2027 and 2028, with zero as the goal, followed by increases at or below inflation in 2029 and 2030.** [Susan Stevenson](#)

That's no longer an aspiration. It's a measurable fiscal commitment.

And it deserves to be taken seriously enough to examine the arithmetic.

Londoners are struggling with housing, groceries, utilities and virtually every other component of the cost of living. There is an entirely understandable attraction to a mayor saying City Hall must stop adding to that burden.

But City Hall experiences inflation too.

Municipal wages rise. Construction materials cost more. Insurance costs change. Fuel costs change. Contracts increase. Police, transit, roads, snow removal, parks, libraries, recreation and other services all have costs.

A tax increase below inflation therefore creates a gap **unless something else changes.**

That doesn't automatically mean service cuts.

London's growing assessment base can generate additional revenue. Genuine efficiencies may exist. Technology can reduce costs. Senior-management restructuring may save money. User-fee and other revenues can increase. Ottawa and Queen's Park can provide additional funding.

Stevenson proposes precisely some of these things: quarterly financial scrutiny, an Auditor General, review of senior-management layers and executive costs and restructuring intended to reduce the cost of top administration while protecting front-line services. [Susan Stevenson](#)

Those ideas deserve to be tested rather than dismissed. But then we need numbers.

How much will they save?

Because if efficiencies, growth and outside revenues don't close the gap, the remaining choices become increasingly limited.

Taxes can rise more than promised.

Reserves can be used, although reserves can't sustainably fund recurring operating expenses forever.

Capital projects can be delayed.

New initiatives can be postponed.

Or services can be reduced.

And that produces a question I think every Londoner should ask about **any** very-low-tax promise:

What services are you prepared to reduce if the savings don't materialize?

That's not an argument against fiscal restraint.

It's an argument for fiscal transparency.

Every tax promise is also a service promise

This may be one of the most important lessons of this exercise.

A politician promising higher taxes should tell us what taxpayers will receive for the additional money.

A politician promising lower taxes should tell us what will cost less, what new revenues will be found, what will become more efficient or what government will stop doing.

The tax rate is only half the promise. The other half is the government it will purchase.

This becomes particularly important for Stevenson because she isn't campaigning simply on doing less.

She's proposing new initiatives and changes of her own: stronger enforcement, neighbourhood responses, expanded oversight, an Auditor General, changes to

transportation planning, business initiatives and a restructured Mayor's Office among them. [Susan Stevenson](#)

So the question isn't simply whether a tax increase below one per cent sounds attractive.

It does.

The question is whether **the government she is promising can be financed by the revenue she is promising to collect.**

That's something her campaign should be able to explain.

Consensus is part of her fiscal plan

There's another important component.

Under Ontario's strong-mayor framework, London's mayor prepares the municipal budget and possesses substantial authority over the budget process.

Stevenson says she will **not use the strong-mayor budget veto.**

Instead, she says she will make her case publicly, welcome debate and build support. That makes her ability to build consensus more than a question of leadership style. It's part of the mechanism by which she proposes to deliver her tax commitment.

If a majority of Council supports expenditures that make a below-one-per-cent increase impossible, how will she persuade councillors otherwise?

If Council rejects the reductions necessary to meet her target, what happens?

Does the budget change?

Does the tax promise change?

Does the mayor seek deeper reductions?

Those are questions about governing.

But Stevenson isn't rejecting strong-mayor authority altogether

This distinction is important.

Stevenson has indicated that she is prepared to use enhanced mayoral authority more directly in relation to senior civic administration.

Her campaign proposes reviewing senior-management layers, responsibilities, vacancies and executive costs and presenting a restructuring plan to reduce the size and cost of top administration.

So her proposed model appears to be:

with Council and the budget: persuasion and consensus;

with civic administration: potentially more direct use of mayoral authority.

And that's where another part of her record becomes particularly relevant.

Her record with civic administration matters

During this Council term, Stevenson's conflicts with civic administration went beyond ordinary disagreements over policy.

In 2024, London's Integrity Commissioner investigated a complaint concerning her treatment of City employees.

The Commissioner's conclusion was explicit: Stevenson's conduct constituted “**harassment, bullying and targeting**,” and the Commissioner found a pattern of behaviour contrary to Council's Code of Conduct.

Stevenson disputed the findings and the characterization of her conduct.

That should be included too. Elected representatives absolutely should challenge administration.

They should question recommendations. They should demand information.

They should expose poor decisions. They should reject staff advice when they believe it's wrong.

That's democratic oversight.

But challenging administration and bullying employees are not the same thing.

And because Stevenson is now seeking an office with significantly greater authority over senior administration, this part of her record becomes directly relevant to the job she's applying for.

What kind of City Hall would she lead?

We shouldn't predict that a Stevenson mayoralty would produce a toxic workplace.

We don't know that.

But the complaint investigated by the Integrity Commissioner alleged that her conduct was creating a toxic work environment for civic administration. The Commissioner ultimately found harassment, bullying and targeting.

That creates legitimate prospective questions.

What would Stevenson do differently as mayor?

How would she ensure that professional staff remained comfortable disagreeing with her?

What objective criteria would determine whether a senior administrator should be replaced?

What process would govern those decisions?

Would Council participate even where the mayor possessed the legal authority to act independently?

And perhaps most importantly:

How would she create an environment in which senior staff could tell the mayor something she didn't want to hear without fearing consequences for doing so?

That's not an accusation about what Stevenson would do.

It's an accountability question arising from what has already happened.

And then there is Council

A mayor doesn't govern alone. Fourteen independently elected councillors still have mandates of their own.

Stevenson's willingness to dissent from Council shouldn't automatically be considered a weakness. Sometimes the dissenter is right.

But being an effective opposition voice and being an effective head of Council are different jobs.

If Stevenson intends to rely on persuasion rather than the budget veto, her ability to create working majorities becomes central to her proposed governing model.

A mayor doesn't need fourteen friends. But a mayor does need enough votes to govern.

So one of the most important questions of a Stevenson mayoralty becomes:

How will you bring people with you?

How would she build productive relationships with councillors who have previously rejected some of her proposals?

How would she respond when Council tells her no?

When would she compromise?

When would she stand firm?

And how would she prevent strong disagreement from becoming destructive to the institution she's trying to lead?

Those aren't personality questions.

They're questions about governing capacity.

The Stevenson Test

Stevenson's record shows persistence. She has repeatedly pursued issues she told voters mattered to her.

Now she's asking for considerably more authority.

So I think her Incumbent Test ultimately becomes:

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

WHAT POWER DID YOU HAVE?

WHAT DID YOU DO WITH IT?

WHAT CHANGED?

WHAT GREATER POWER ARE YOU ASKING FOR NOW?

HOW WILL YOU USE IT?

HOW WILL YOU PAY FOR WHAT YOU'RE PROMISING?

And:

HOW WILL YOU BRING PEOPLE WITH YOU?

Those seem to me much more useful questions than whether someone simply likes or dislikes Susan Stevenson.

This is a job application.

We should examine the record.