CANADIAN METROPOLITICS

GOVERNING OUR CITIES

JAMES LIGHTBODY

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Preface

I LIKE THE POLITICS of the city. It was through urbanization that ancient peoples built the major civilizations of the modern world. Even today, any great society is best defined by the wealth of the human spirit captured within its largest communities. And, if indeed "all politics is local" as the legendary American congressman Tip O'Neill often declared, then the heart of our democratic process lies on the doorsteps of city hall. This, at least, is what I choose to believe. City politics are too important to be rooted in the indifference of the majority.

Canadian Metropolitics is an anthology written for mid-career undergraduates in the social sciences by the instructors who teach them. It explains who and what is important in current Canadian city politics, and why, how, and when. After exploring the basic historical, legal, and political-economy contexts of modern Canadian city government, which is often where other very good textbook treatments end, this book uses several issues as points of departure to demonstrate the special relevance of city politics to students who are also educated and interested democratic citizens. The final chapter pulls together the several separate discussions into something of a survivor's guide.

Canadian Metropolitics is interdisciplinary in approach. Its common theme is the contemporary Canadian city; its unifying approach is the public-policy perspective. Specific topics such as city planning, public education, intergovernmental relations, the environment, and the particular significance of gender in municipal politics illustrate divergent facets of the modern Canadian city. While the book

acknowledges the importance and relevance of competing theoretical approaches, its emphasis is at heart practical in accumulating knowledge and applying it. Each chapter contains selected data and numerous practical examples which will be familiar to students.

This book is not blinkered by a strictly central Canadian focus. As well, from the point of view of instructors, the book's value lies partly in the fact that its contents closely parallel actual course outlines. *Canadian Metropolitics* is designed to be a core text, not a supplementary anthology (though it may also be used as such). Each author was asked to write specifically for this book, and each chapter presents a discrete topic, approach, or issue. For students, the book affords the opportunity to provide local examples from their personal experiences to illustrate or supplement the main themes being advanced. The book's comprehensive index helps to integrate the discussion of concepts, political actors, and institutions.

I believe that the strengths of *Canadian Metropolitics* are many. For but a few examples, try these. In her chapter, Linda Trimble evaluates how and, more important, why women have forged such successful careers at the city hall level. She expands upon contemporary feminist theory and presents impressive new data to support her argument that traditional role perceptions help only a little in our appreciation of what genuinely is at stake. Peter Smith's critical examination of past Canadian city planning in the metropolis leads him to present a very strong case for an activist, interventionist, planning profession as an antidote to what he implicitly sees as ineffective political leadership. Mary Louise McAllister uses current issues in environmental management to explain what is on the table for each of us as citizen stakeholders in so-called environmental politics. And Tim Thomas explores the institutional and practical political barriers that account for the failure of genuine citizen leadership at city hall, providing examples drawn from cities across Canada's regions and cultures. Other chapters are equally provocative. In short, all these authors are very good at what they do. I thank them, and the many others in the small community that studies Canadian city governance, for their support of this project.

Federal-provincial politics have always struck me as an interminable game of chess with set strategic moves and pieces whose powers are very well known. Let's be honest: constitutional debates

are rather boring. In stark contrast to this kind of politics is the never-ending story that unfolds through city hall. The city is potentially the most directly democratic of any of our governing institutions. Still, no city council is without its unbelievable character, no city policy is complete without a wrangle, and no regulation is without its unintended consequence. City politics are like a game of poker, with its bluffs, ruses, and powers of deceit. In this game the poker face counts for much, each player is independent, and there is always room for another chair at the table! City politics are alive; they are still the stuff of coffee-shop talk. It is my hope that students will find as much joy in surviving big city politics as my generation has. I also hope that this book is helpful in that pursuit.

Responsibility for *Canadian Metropolitics* lies principally with my editor at Copp Clark Longman, Jeff Miller, who knows his business, and baseball, very well indeed. His curiosity, energy, and support sustained this project whenever the deepest darkness of Edmonton's winter closed in (as during August 1992). I am also appreciative of the fine work, keen eye, and factual zealotry of our structural and copy editor, Curtis Fahey.

My own students have always asked serious and important questions while my city's councillors and senior administrators have generously provided a constant parade of unintended humour with which to illustrate lectures and essays. Only a city such as 1990s Edmonton, for instance, would drop the motto of "City of Champions" for "Turning up the Heat"—from glory to gas in the shift of a single slogan!

My daughters, Tanya and Teresa, have lived patiently within my real world of politics and have always helped to keep this world, and the many ministers, mayors, and bureaucrats who comprise it, in proper perspective. Finally, special thanks to a special friend, Lisa.

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Why Study City Politics?

James Lightbody

THE POLITICS OF CANADIAN CITIES are important. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to set the stage for understanding the context in which those politics take place and what, in the shape of decisions, develops as a result of those politics. Public policy is the primary dependent variable—that is, the consequence of the political process—which political scientists try to explain. The other writers in this book come to their particular subjects from differing academic perspectives. But, ultimately, we are all concerned with who gets what, when, where, and why.

Not all citizens demand only, or even primarily for that matter, policy options to which a price tag can be easily attached; government is more than a Shoppers' Drug Mart, after all. As will become clear in this text, we may expect such non-monetary decisions to be important, especially at city hall where priority choices about matters such as parking, protection, and privacy are scrolled on the daily policy menu. Indeed, it is in regulating the intensity of closely interdependent city living that modern Canadians and their governments most directly establish the boundaries of, and set the terms for, their daily existence. This is not at all to say that cities do not take important actions affecting people's pocketbooks; frequently, the first and best measure of what a city government is really up to is its budget documents. The point is that Canada is a nation of cities, and the choices made by city councillors directly define our lifestyle.

Although Canadians often like to think of themselves in sylvan terms, there is no denying that Canada is an urban community. The federal government's statistical definition of urbanism is a population centre of 1000 or more people in an area with a population density of 400 per square kilometre. In the 1991 census, 76.6 per cent of Canadians were counted as urban. For statistical purposes, a census metropolitan area is defined as "a main labour market of a continuous built-up area having a population of 100 000 or more" and, by 1991, 61 per cent of the national population lived in such areas. All twenty-five Canadian CMAs increased their population from 1986 to 1992 and substantially over half of us live in the Quebec City through Windsor urban corridor.

Table I:
Population of Canadian cities and census metropolitan areas, 1991

Cities			*Census Metropolitan Areas*		
1. Montreal	1 017 666	(1)*	1. Toronto	3 893 046	(1)*
2. Calgary	710 677	(3)	2. Montreal	3 127 242	(2)
3. Toronto	635 395	(2)	3. Vancouver	1 602 502	(3)
4. Winnipeg	616 790	(4)	4. Ottawa-Hull	920 857	(4)
5. Edmonton	616 741	(6)	5. Edmonton	839 924	(5)
6. North York	562 564	(5)	6. Calgary	754 033	(6)
7. Scarborough	524 598	(7)	7. Winnipeg	652 354	(7)
8. Vancouver	471 844	(8)	8. Quebec City	645 550	(8)
9. Mississauga	463 388	(9)	9. Hamilton	599 760	(9)
10. Hamilton	318 499	(10)	10. London	381 522	(12)
11. Laval	314 398	(13)	11. St Cath Niag.	364 552	(10)
12. Ottawa	313 987	(12)	12. Kitchener-Wat.	356 421	(11)
13. Etobicoke	309 993	(11)	13. Halifax	320 501	(13)

* Indicates 1981 Rank

Source: Statistics Canada, *Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations*, Catalogue 92-303 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1992).

What constitutes a "city" is quite another matter. Demographers, and other social scientists, have many fascinating differences among themselves as to the definition of a distinct city (especially within

intensively built urban corridors), often using commuter-sheds to the main place of work as a key variable. Fine, but most citizens hold to their own personal sense of identity and location, depending on the situation. For example, there may be important psychological villages without government form even within the boundaries of our largest cities, places such as the Beaches in Toronto, Gastown in Vancouver, and Old Strathcona in Edmonton. At the same time, however, few persons vacationing at Disney World, for instance, would go to the bother of volunteering that they are from "Etobicoke" rather than simply saying "Toronto."

Yet, once a year, when property taxes are due, people come to the poignant recollection that they reside in Dartmouth, say, and not Halifax. Cities in Canada are institutions, legally incorporated under provincial statutes, and their boundaries are seldom the same as their metropolitan environments. For particular reasons, Calgary and Winnipeg are the main exemptions to this rule. Most metropolitan areas in Canada are governed by a number of local municipalities. For example, the largest city within the Victoria metropolitan area is Saanich. There are over 5000 incorporated units of local government among the provinces; Canada has about 120 cities as such. And the defining characteristic of Canadian metropolitics is that, even where an area-wide second tier of government exists, the local town or city commands a powerful allegiance based on the political orientations of citizens.

The practical consequence of this is that any attempt to reduce the large number of local level municipalities through some form of consolidation is virtually predestined to fail. The strength of this community attachment to local cities, often underestimated by metropolitan reform advocates, is hard to understate: in 1980, to take one example, the school children of St Albert (a small suburb of Edmonton then under threat of amalgamation) were all urged to send Valentine's cards to Premier Peter Lougheed deploring the initiative, with the wording, "We love our city, let us keep it." Prior to this, in a publicity-stunt variation on a mediaeval ceremony, their parents had physically beaten the length of the community's borders with birch fronds to ward off evil spirits (presumably residing in the core city to which most of them commuted to work). For whatever reasons, St Albert exists today as an autonomous municipality.

One theme that has lingered over practical discussions of Canadian city politics is the persistent sense of nostalgia for our roots in some fictitious, but glorious, rural past. This belief partly derives from a strong cultural heritage in which the city itself was thought to be evil; a decision to move into such a place was somehow inherently immoral and a desertion of civilized values. Why else indeed would otherwise sensible citizens cast rodents as city mascots? Even today, as a nation, a large chunk of our shared cultural mythology is defined by the romance of the farm, the frontier, and the wilderness. How little of our currency, for instance, bears other than rustic symbols! To move from the sublime to the ridiculous, what images do big city telephone books present of their communities? In 1986 Quebec City's book portrayed a shed in a maple sugar bush, while Montreal's showed pink foxtails in the Laurentian mountains; Calgary produced a montage of elk, a kodiak bear, a person in a kayak; Victoria unveiled a farmer's field at the steps of a mountain, and, as John Sewell has noted, Halifax's book had a drawing on the front cover of lush foliage viewed from a cabin window while the back cover boasted "a stretched out dead chipmunk and other collector's specimens."[1] Only Edmonton and Vancouver, among the major cities, had urban vistas.

The more serious side of this honest misrepresentation is reflected in patterns of political representation. All of Canada's provincial legislatures through the present have endured a rural imbalance in representation greater than that permitted federally. For instance, in Alberta, for the provincial election in 1993, fifteen of the province's eighty-three ridings were 25 per cent larger (urban) or smaller (rural) than the size of the average provincial constituency. Edmonton's constituencies were 11.3 per cent, and Calgary's 15.4, larger in population than the provincial average. At the extreme, Calgary-Egmont's 27 858 voters had the same legislative power as Cardston's 8675. What this means in practical terms is that the urban Calgary elector had about one-third the value to a government seeking re-election as a rural Cardstonite. The recent stance of the Supreme Court of Canada has not given much support to appeals under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms for representational parity between urban and rural voters.[2]

This legislative imbalance has clear consequences for the types of policy questions raised in cabinet, caucus, and commons. In Alberta, no municipal affairs minister represented an urban riding for the

entire span of Social Credit (1935–71), and no such Manitoba minister represented a Winnipeg area riding until 1969 despite the fact that by shortly after the Second World War more than half of the province's population lived there and nineteen of the twenty-four major municipal governments in the province lay within the metropolitan zone. Departments of municipal affairs, symbolically and practically, became service agencies for rural and small town Canada.

So cities have had to fend for themselves, and often they have done this quite well as the skill of the respective political leadership has permitted. In the province of Quebec, the mayor of Montreal ran rough-shod over the provincial department of municipal affairs to impose his form of metropolitan government on Montreal island in the aftermath of the 1969 police strike. For a further example, to obtain a better share of revenues locally generated, the city-owned telephone system in Edmonton reprogrammed its computers on Valentine's Day, 1984, to prevent the provincial telephone company from recording the origins of long distance calls.

More fundamentally, in law and in character, our general local government framework still displays its nineteenth-century origins. As we will observe throughout this text, despite numerous reform initiatives the heart and soul of Canadian city form and structure, its ideas and applications, has remained Ontario's Municipal Corporations (Baldwin) Act of 1849. This fact has placed serious restrictions upon what even the most intelligent and progressive city councillor may accomplish when in office. Seven generations later, the style of governance promoted by the Baldwin Act—a style that took root and flourished at a time when government as a whole was intended to accomplish very little and popular democracy as we understand the concept today was still widely mistrusted—continues to cramp severely the interventionist ambitions of city governments.

City Politics Matter

Canadian cities make important policy choices that have a direct impact upon our personal lives. In its varied forms, the policy that emanates from city hall codifies important social values, regulates

personal privacy, and generates and restricts economic activity over and above the protective, social, and recreational services we most directly notice. Cities such as Edmonton, Calgary, and North York are each four times the size of the province of Prince Edward Island. As corporations, they are themselves very big businesses. Measured by its purchases of goods and services from small business, for instance, Edmonton is annually among the twenty largest Canadian corporations. Metropolitan Toronto and Montreal would be, by population alone, the third and fourth largest Canadian provinces. Cities own telephone companies, railway lines, airports, parking garages, and billion-dollar utilities such as Edmonton Power and its Genessee power plant. Cities also license businesses, bicycles, massage parlours, taxis, and dogs.

Taken together, Canadian municipalities are major actors in the national economy. If we were to look at total government expenditures as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1989, the federal government accounted for 18.62, the ten provinces for 14.68, and the combined local authorities for 8.02 per cent. Further, the data in Table 2 demonstrates rather vividly the scale of combined municipal operations in the area of government employment. It is twice that of the national government and equivalent to that of the provinces. Of course, significant questions of accountability arise when the self-professed amateur politicians in cities raise and spend such large sums in a non-partisan system with neither governmental nor any comprehensive extra-governmental opposition.

All that said, the fiscal position of local governments in the intergovernmental arrangement, as shown in Table 3, is difficult at best, and it must be remembered as well that most local authorities, by law, are not allowed to enter into debt on current (or operating) budgets. When one looks at the pattern of revenues and expenditures overall, we see that for the calendar year 1990 Canadian municipalities stood deeply in debt. But this is *before* transfer payments from other levels of government. The subordinate financial position of even our greatest cities stems from unchanged and by now outdated revenue sources: local government direct revenues, as a percentage of GDP (4.28 per cent), are almost exactly as they were in 1926. Even the most casual observer of the system would recognize that demands for city expenditures have changed significantly in number and nature from that earlier time. The disparity between the cities' limited funding

Table 2:
Public-sector employment, 1992

	Employees (hundred thousands)	*% change from 1991*	*% of total paid workers*
Public sector	2685	0.0%	23.0%
Federal	562	-1.5	3.8
Provincial/terr.	1111	-0.5	10.0
Local	1012	+1.4	9.2
Government (excludes business enterprises)	2335	+0.3	19.9
Federal	413	−1.3	2.5
Provincial/terr.	964	−0.2	8.7
Local	959	+1.5	8.7

Source: Statistics Canada data as reported in the *Globe and Mail,* 2 November 1993.

sources and their ever-growing responsibilities accounts for much of the rancour underpinning intergovernmental relations in Canada. Nor is this all. If, as is currently suggested, the 1990s will be the decade of the deficit for all levels of authority, then the broader levels of government can be expected to try to restrict their expenditures. In the past it has often been possible, after the usual alternatives of privatizing, user-pay, and slashbacks have been explored, to "off-load" programs onto Canada's cities. Whether the resource of the property tax base has become exhausted for this purpose will increasingly become the object of intense debate.

Still, there is a perception that cities do not deal with the grand issues of "high politics" and so their politics usually possess a low level of salience for most citizens. Issues of war and peace, economic and fiscal policy, employment and health standards, and the never-ending constitutional debates (which hold direct relevance for very few Canadians) are debated and occasionally resolved at the national level. Provincial governments in the 1990s play major roles in devising standards for the implementation of important federal programs

Table 3:
Expenditures/Revenues in the national system before transfers (in $ millions), calendar year 1990

	Federal	*Provincial*	*Local*
Revenues	$126 313	114 541	28 762
Expenditures	125 081	98 575	53 886
Surplus/Deficit	+1 232	+15 966	−25 124

Source: Statistics Canada data as presented by the Canadian Tax Foundation, *Provincial and Municipal Finances, 1991* (Toronto: 1992), 3:2.

(social assistance, medicare, hospitalization, post-secondary education) and directly involve themselves in the exploitation of natural resources, the development of transportation arteries, and the provision of schooling.

Set against these concerns, how can the local issues of planning, potholes, and police protection compete? None of this is often the arena of media hype; few civic policies hold the attention of the community cosmopolitans for long, and those which do suggest that the agendas of city elites, and their very focussed lobbies, are not the same as those of local electors. To put this another way, whereas the urban political leadership cadre seems to be drawn from those who are concerned with such concepts as "progress" and "modern government," neighbourhood electors tend to be concrete, parochial, and short-term in their demands of councils. For the former, environmental issues are "writ large" (ozone depletion, global warming); for most of the rest of us, what our neighbours do to, and in, their backyards holds more immediate, sustained environmental consequence.

If cities are theoretically at the heart of generating wealth in our civilization because of their accumulation of a critical mass of abilities, they have turned this phenomenon into a somewhat tawdry affair in the twentieth century. The infatuation with unrestrained growth, often expressed in brazenly sophomoric terms, has become synonymous with the Canadian metropolis. It is a coveted form of recognition for Canadian cities to be singled out in a survey by a major national publication as one of "Canada's best cities for busi-

ness." Winnipeg, Moncton, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Montreal were so chosen in 1993 by the *Globe's Report on Business* as the finest coddlers of business in the country! A U.S. businessman is cited: "We looked at Provo, Utah, and Omaha, Nebraska—but those cities' 'special treatment' and TLC are perfunctory and institutionalized at this point. We were looking for a city that would develop an infrastructure for us as a partner. And in Winnipeg, Manitoba, you're admitted like an adopted son."[3]

Now, for most people, to be chosen ahead of some small town in Utah or Nebraska, even for the better surfing, would be no big deal. But Canadian cities have given away the keys consistently. In this, Winnipeg has had a solidly typical track record; to attract the CPR main line in the 1870s, that city's council not only provided land grants, a $200 000 bonus, and a $300 000 bridge over the Red River but also exempted railway lands "from city taxation forever." These days it seems more fashionable for city promoters to lobby for major league sports franchises but business boons still abound. Even social-democratic municipal partisans have been swept up in unabashed hucksterism as their labour supporters (especially among the building trades) have clamoured for the jobs that come with large-scale developments. This is one reason for the persistently observed shift to the right by leftist city councillors over their time in office.

Boosterism has had direct consequences for the general direction of city politics, in both senses of that word; that is, who should be in charge and what they should be charging towards. In his insightful analysis of Winnipeg's formative period, Alan Artibise wrote of the city's business elite and its role in civic government: "There was never any doubt as to who would control the government . . . a centralized form of government assured Winnipeg's businessmen that their conception of desirable public policy would prevail."[4] The same comment could apply to virtually any other Canadian city. The business concept of public policy meant, very simply, that the expansion of economic enterprise should be the primary focus for local government: all of its energies and concerns ought to be directed towards sustained commercial growth even if such an approach were to mean the neglect of all other objectives. This has been the single most dominant theme in twentieth-century Canadian urban development.