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## ***Review Essay***

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Collectively these four volumes mark, however tentatively and unevenly, the beginning of a significant new direction in the study of Canadian urban politics. They begin to move us away from the traditional focus on structures and services to a closer examination of the relationship between urban governments and civil society. While they point us down these exciting new paths, none of these books provides an adequate road map to help us complete the journey. Nevertheless, some of the themes that emerge from these volumes are useful starting points.

Karen Herland's book, *People, Potholes and City Politics*, is intended to be a "how-to-book" for citizens to understand and access city hall in Montreal. As a guidebook, this could serve as an excellent model for manuals on other Canadian cities. Herland begins with a very good critical overview of Montreal's party politics. She then offers a guided tour of city departments, explaining what various committees and departments do and providing useful contact information for key public officials. The detailed description of the nine planning districts established by the City in 1988 is a ready resource for anyone wishing to know more about the economic and social base of Montreal at a micro level. By far the weakest section of the book is the superficial treatment of the role of the Montreal Urban Community and its relationship to municipal government. Even though the second tier is comparatively weak in Montreal, a more detailed and critical perspective could be anticipated in a guidebook of this kind, because one of the most difficult issues in understanding urban governance from a citizen's perspective is sorting out the roles and responsibilities of municipal and metropolitan levels in two-tier systems. The major shortcoming of the book, however, is simply that it is now outdated due to both the transition in power from Jean Doré's MCM to Pierre Bourque's Vision Montreal and the major administrative restructuring that has taken place in the past two years. But, this book still makes a contribution to urban democracy by demonstrating in very practical ways how citizens can move issues through the political and bureaucratic processes. It deserves a second edition and to be emulated in other Canadian cities.

While Hasson and Ley's book, *Neighbourhood Associations and the Welfare State*, also holds valuable lessons for citizen

organizing, it is a scholarly treatment of advocacy activity by community associations in case studies of four diverse neighbourhoods in Vancouver and four in Jerusalem, rather than a citizens' handbook. This volume stands in stark contrast to the prevailing common wisdom, often reflected in academic works,<sup>1</sup> that all interest groups at the urban level are merely tire-some NIMBYS. Instead, Hasson and Ley (and James Duncan as the author of one chapter) use their case studies to paint detailed and richly textured pictures of how neighbourhood groups work to frame issues, build allies, rally supporters and test their leaders in different ways, depending on the nature of their issues and their communities. The reader is rescued from getting lost in the detail of the cases by well written introductory and concluding chapters that set out a framework of analysis. Both contextual factors (such as the common interests of residents and macrosocietal features) and the agency of the community actors (such as the types of leaders and availability of resources) are used to explain the success of groups in influencing the urban state.

In my urban government course, I use the four cases drawn from Vancouver as a teaching tool: one-quarter of the class reads each of the cases and then discusses the recurring themes of which strategies worked and which did not in influencing urban public policy. An instructive lesson in community mobilization and lobbying is derived from comparing the actions of the citizens of upper class Shaughnessy Heights in their attempt to protect their lifestyle against possible intensification of residential development, despite a major housing crisis in the city; and the Downtown Eastside Residents' Association in its efforts to reframe the image of their neighbourhood from a dysfunctional "skid row" to a residential community that deserves to be taken seriously. The contribution of this work is that it reflects upon the major dilemma currently facing citizen associations as they are forced to make the transition from representatives and advocates of communities to becoming partners and co-producers in urban services. How can they balance the role of representatives with that of service providers? Hasson and Ley are among the very few Canadian scholars who have begun to address this issue.

*Political Arrangements: Power and the City* edited by Henri Lustiger-Thaler and *Urban Lives: Fragmentation Resistance* edited by Vered Amit-Talai and Lustiger-Thaler are both multidisciplinary collections with loosely woven themes. The underlying objective of *Political Arrangements* is to explore the role of municipalities in redesigning of the broad structures of government in Canada. The highlights of the collection include an historical explanation by Engin Isin of why, in spite of a period of liberal municipalism in the 1830s and 1840s, discourse about the centrality of municipalities fell out of the confederation debates; an exploration of the face of the feminist city by Caroline Andrew; and a reprint of Jane Jacobs article, "Cities and the Wealth of Nations." In case studies, Kent Gerecke and Barton Reid make a compelling argument that the abandonment of

urban affairs by the federal government has amplified destructive sectarian tendencies in Winnipeg and Annick Germain considers the impact of immigration in Montreal on relationships between local and Quebec politics.

The even more eclectic *Urban Lives* challenges the notion that urban studies is a coherent, sharply distinct field. Rather, the editors attempt to break away from discipline-bound perspectives by bringing together a variety of sociologists, geographers, political scientists and planners to examine how the local is "socially constructed, politically imagined, and spatially configured." The result is a mishmash of chapters ranging from a study of the representation of space in Kimberley, BC, to a personal sketch of ethnographic fieldwork in Tehran, Cairo and Montreal to a more traditional critique of land use planning processes. From a governance perspective, two chapters are of particular interest. The chapter, "Recasting Political Analysis," by Caroline Andrew confronts traditional views of municipalities as mere service providers and examines the impact of the global on the local. Her thesis is that in an increasingly global economy city governments are forced to be involved simultaneously in social policy and in global questions. The chapter, 'New Social Partnerships' by Marguerite Mendell continues this theme by critically analyzing the implications for democracy and for social movements of the attempts by urban governments to forge new relationships with movements as service delivery partners. Her conclusion is not an optimistic one, arguing that the decentralization of decision making has inhibited the renewal of democracy at the local level.

To date, most urban government texts have reinforced a myopic view of city politics — that urban political debates are, at best, extremely limited because they are overwhelmingly focused on issues related to property and efficient provision of services or that, at worst, urban politics has died a quiet death at its own hand.<sup>2</sup> As these volumes collectively suggest in their attempts to examine the community base of urban politics, such blinkered approaches are outdated, if they ever were truly accurate. As Herland reminds us, city politics, particularly in Montreal, has long engaged in debates about who gets to participate and how they will participate in decision making.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, three forces are transforming the nature and face of urban politics so that discourses related to citizen engagement and quality of life issues are central. First, as a result of a globalized economy, our metropolitan cities are increasingly in direct international competition with each other in their economic development activities. The single most important aspect of a city's comparative advantage in such competition (and probably the only element it can signifi-

cantly influence) is its quality of life. Debates over how and who defines quality of life are thus increasingly important. A second major transformation is being brought about by the growing social and cultural diversity of our major urban centres. Visible minorities already constitute roughly a quarter of the population of greater Toronto and Vancouver, and the minority populations of Canada's larger cities are expected to double by 2016. Culture is a key ingredient in the way minorities organize themselves and in how they view and deal with government; thus urban governments have to learn to engage cultural communities in appropriate ways. Third, the overall governance structure of Canada is in the process of being disentangled and, in many cases, offloaded to nongovernmental players. In social policy, the real debates about decentralization are now taking place outside the federal-provincial domain and are between provincial and city governments and between cities and their voluntary sector partners. While policy is being increasingly centralized by provincial governments or regionalized (as with the creation of regional health districts and family services districts in Alberta, and potentially in Ontario), delivery is being devolved to voluntary agencies and community organizations. The result appears to be a growing distance between social policy and service delivery. Where will this trend leave municipal governments? Is there a renewed role for the federal government in more direct involvement in urban issues?

The overarching implication of these economic, social and political transformations is that urban governments need to rethink the means of citizen engagement—to find ways to engage citizens and their associations as partners and co-producers of urban services *and* as representatives of increasingly diverse communities. As scholars, an appreciation of the community bases of urban politics and a deeper understanding and an expanded view of what constitutes the political is a vital necessity. While these books do not adequately address all of the issues that are emerging from a redefinition of governance, they at least begin to open new routes, including multidisciplinary ones and self-guided tours, for exploring the roles of citizens in urban politics.

#### **Notes**

1. James Lightbody, "Why Study City Politics?" and "Surviving City Politics" In James Lightbody (ed.), *Canadian Metropolitcs* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1995), pp. 1–26 and 290–314.
2. See Andrew Sancton, "Conclusion: Canadian City Politics in Comparative Perspective," in Warren Magnusson and Andrew Sancton (eds.), *City Politics in Canada*: (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), pp. 291-317 and Mark Gottdeiner, *The Decline of Urban Politics: Political Theory and the Crisis of the Local State* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987).