

# Is Bigger Better?

## A review of Andrew Sancton's *Merger Mania: The Assault on Local Government*

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Is it better to be big or small? This is a question on the minds of many municipal officials as they try to cope with the economic and social realities of the 21st century. Does big government bring “weakness and corruption rather than imagination and quality of service” (p.8) or are smaller municipalities “inherently wasteful, inefficient, and incapable of co-operating with each other” (p.14)?

Andrew Sancton explores these issues in his concise volume on municipal mergers. Using recently proposed amalgamations around Montreal as the driving force, Sancton navigates the often contested and ill-informed history of municipal mergers. Drawing on examples spanning the globe, Sancton highlights many of the key issues that need to be addressed when considering the merits of amalgamation. Examining the historical arguments for previous mergers,

Merger Mania provides a valuable account of the lessons to be learned from previous amalgamations around the globe.

Merger Mania begins with an examination of the historical context of municipal amalgamations in the U.S. from 1854 to 1942, including the case study of the municipal consolidation of New York City in 1898. This case raises many interesting questions as New York is the largest municipal government in America and, arguably, the economic centre of the world, yet was virtually bankrupt for much of the 1970s (today, the financial fortunes of the city are better due to controlled spending).

Sancton continues by examining the era of big government in the 1960s and 1970s, using Winnipeg as an example of this trend. ‘Unicity’ came into force in 1972, replacing the previous two-tier system comprising the Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg and twelve lower-tier municipalities, as a response to the sentiment that “govern-

mental fragmentation was hurting development” and was responsible for many of the social ills facing the area (p.57). The author highlights the unforeseen consequences that followed as suburban areas optimized their comparative growth potential to the detriment of the inner city. This trend has since been identified and is improving; however, the success of Winnipeg’s amalgamation is still debated.

Sancton goes on to explore municipal amalgamations in the 1990s using examples from New Zealand and Great Britain, as well as Canadian examples in Nova Scotia and Ontario (including the new Toronto ‘megacity’). The author finds that “not all public policy decisions are made on the basis of careful and rational evaluations of alternative courses of action or inaction” (p.112) and that it is unclear whether these attempts to save money and create economic development have been successful. Sancton concludes by returning to the case of Montreal and relates what has been learned in this proposed amalgamation.

At the heart of the amalgamation debate is whether it is better to be big or small. Unfortunately, Sancton’s work does little to answer this question directly, and for good reason. There is no simple solution to this inquiry. The point of the book is not to create a formula for what is the ideal size of a city or municipality. Indeed, this “search for ideals is doomed to failure” (p.21). Rather, the fundamental lesson to take from this book is whether changing municipal boundaries solves the problems initially posited for their change?

Sancton identifies variables that Manitoba municipalities would be well advised to consider. Amalgamation in and of itself may not be the answer. Municipal councils have an obligation to their constituents to prioritize their needs and identify problems and possible solutions. In some cases, a well thought out and civically supported amalgamation may be the answer while, in others, the solution may be as simple as increased cooperation and service agreements. There is no magic formula that will decide if it is better to be big or small. The answer truly lies with those who are closest to the issue: municipal officials themselves.

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