

Urban Affairs: Back on the Policy Agenda

by Caroline Andrew, Katherine A. Graham and Susan D. Phillips, editors:

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Reviewed by Erin Boutang, AMM Policy Analyst

With a federal election approaching, it seems appropriate to examine just how important municipal affairs are for other orders of government and for citizens themselves. This book looks at the degree to which municipal affairs make up Canada's policy agenda. It offers a fresh look at Canadian municipal policy and sets out to, "illuminate the inter-governmental context and the policy and fiscal environment in which (municipal) governments find themselves as we head into the 21st Century (p. 4)." By examining areas where municipalities have assumed a growing dominance, the editors look at the changed roles and responsibilities of local governments and, more importantly, do so from a municipal perspective. Although focused mainly on Ottawa's dealing with larger urban centres, many of the book's principles and conclusions can be applied to all municipalities, regardless of size.

The book begins by identifying the new environment in which municipal governments operate and how inter-governmental relations play out as a result. It focuses on three players – Ottawa, provincial governments and citizens. It begins with the changed federal environment, highlighting the post-war period of higher government spending on social programs and welfare state economic policy (programs that were increasingly abandoned throughout the 1980s and '90s). As a result, "In spite of the vital and growing responsibilities of municipal governments in the development and delivery of social programs... they remain relatively invisible in our thinking about both the federal system and about social policy (p. 9)."

Secondly, the book gives attention to the changed relationship between provinces and municipalities. It says, "The reality has been significant downloading of responsibilities to municipalities without financial compensation and a sharp reduction in provincial-municipal transfers (p. 10)."

Finally, it focuses on what citizens now think about municipal governments and how they are no longer viewed as mere service-providers but as important governing bodies that must be representative of, and responsive to, constituents' needs. The

introductory chapter does an exceptional job of highlighting how municipal affairs have changed over the last 30 years and also provides an excellent starting point from which to examine subsequent chapters.

If the reader accepts that the role of municipalities has changed, what does this mean for Canada's focus on municipal affairs? "In addressing whether urban affairs are, in fact, on contemporary policy agendas, the book studies four key areas: building civil society; urban governance; planning and economic development; and fiscal challenges (p. 13)."

The first broad area – building civil society – examines, "The involvement and experience of four critical components of civil society in the (municipal) context: immigrant communities, Aboriginal peoples, women and inner city residents (p. 14)."

Particularly relevant for Manitoba is the chapter on "Aboriginal People in Urban Areas," by Evelyn Peters. It emphasizes how Aboriginal urbanization has been constructed as a policy 'problem' and suggests ways of supporting urban Aboriginal cultures that would better meet the needs of these communities. The establishment of Ottawa's Urban Aboriginal Strategy (1997) signals a growing interest in urban Aboriginal affairs. However, the chapter's author argues that Aboriginal policy may be better managed at the municipal level. She looks at existing Aboriginal associations, including two Winnipeg-based groups – the Aboriginal Centre Inc. and the Winnipeg Native Family Economic Development Corporation – and how they are working to provide culturally-sensitive services to Aboriginal urban populations, which are not provided effectively from Ottawa.

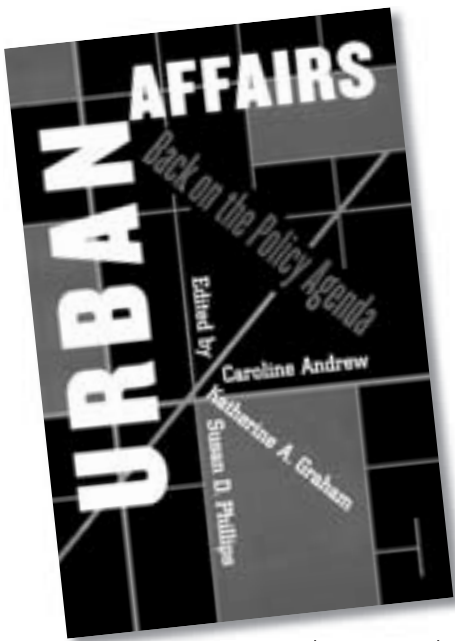
While senior levels of government hold jurisdiction over many programs affecting Aboriginal groups, Peters argues that the hierarchical structure of service delivery may contribute to the weak and problematic incorporation of Aboriginal groups into Canada's urban policy scene. It favours changes to policy and jurisdiction where, "Aboriginal people (are) involved in identifying and putting into place appropriate initiatives (p. 63)" – something that may be best co-ordinated

at the local level.

The second broad area the book examines is governance. It focuses on the citizen to determine the importance of municipal affairs. This section addresses some of the most pressing debates about how political structures in urban areas are being re-organized. The first chapter, by **M. Nicholds**, offers excellent background to this question and makes a strong case for the increased prevalence of municipal issues from a citizen's perspective. Nicholds says municipal affairs have moved to the forefront on the public agenda. While the public may feel powerless in their dealings with Ottawa, they do feel as though they have some direct influence over the issues that impact on their everyday lives. Nicholds gives a number of examples where citizens actively participate in identifying concerns and work toward solutions, helping to align community priorities with municipal policy. A Manitoba example is the community policing initiative in Stonewall where a variety of groups worked with RCMP to develop policing priorities and identify areas of citizen involvement. The result has not only been greater public involvement in setting police service priorities, but also a greater role for the public in local government and less apathy toward governance in general. Therefore, local governments play an important leadership role and can help instill a sense of community ownership and identity. Whether they will obtain the required power from other levels of government is another story.

The book's third broad area is planning and economic development. The editors argue that approaches to these subjects have changed greatly in 30 years. "The promotion of economic development by municipalities has become not only explicitly concerned with sustainability but also with being more community oriented (p. 16)."

In this section, an important chapter for Manitobans is "Community Economic Development in Canadian Cities: From Experiment to Mainstream," by **B. Levine**, **S. Torjman** and **P. Born**. It identifies new responsibilities of municipal governments in bringing together stakeholders to develop a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to economic development. It describes



community economic development and what it does, documents the current experience, suggests strategies for enhancing its effectiveness, and recommends potential roles for municipal governments. The AMM's own experience with the Economic Development Task Force highlighted the need for economic development to be community owned and operated. So, too, does the chapter by Levine, Torjman and Born who note that federal and provincial disinvestment in regional and social development prompts action by municipalities to sustain rural communities. In fact, these authors list ways that municipalities can support community economic renewal by supporting networks of CED practitioners and joining multi-stakeholder roundtables or CED committees; advocating new policies and regulations at the provincial and federal levels; introducing new policies and regulations within their own jurisdiction that remove barriers to CED; and promoting jobs and the creation of community wealth.

The final broad section of the book is dedicated to the fiscal challenges that municipalities face. In the Manitoba experience, traditional forms of revenue generation are not meeting the needs of local citizens – infrastructure is crumbling and recreational facilities are inadequate. An important chapter in this section is “Some Puppets; Some Shoestrings!” by **K. Cameron**. It examines how the changing mandates of federal governments in the past 30 years have affected the place of municipal affairs on the policy agenda. Cameron explains how cutbacks of grants and transfers to local governments have produced a greater appetite for community-based solutions. He further argues that,

although municipalities may have lost ground financially, they've gained political influence at the local level:

With polls showing local governments enjoying the highest level of trust and support of all the orders of government, and with the level of downloading at a point beyond which it cannot go much farther, local governments have seized opportunities to craft solutions and have dared provincial governments to interfere. Intelligent puppets can learn how to cope with weak shoestrings (p. 307).

Cameron argues that, in the formal sense, the provinces continue to govern municipalities – but, in the political sense, it's the people and their local representatives that govern.

This book offers an important and recent look at common issues and trends in Canadian municipalities, and pays special attention to the areas where they are gaining influence. Unfortunately, the book's conclusion is overly pessimistic: “The (municipal) dimension of analysis and policy formation is weak within the federal milieu. Neither has it been particularly strong at the provincial level (p. 18).”

The author would like to end on a more optimistic note. Despite the fact that this book was published in 2002, it appears dated. Municipal affairs have adopted a more prominent position at the federal and provincial levels in recent months. **Paul Martin's** promise to dedicate a portion of federal fuel tax to municipalities is an indicator of renewed municipal commitment at the federal level. Winnipeg's 'New Deal' has influenced both senior levels of government and has drawn attention to the inability of municipalities to provide necessary services without greater federal and provincial support (or greater taxation power). In Manitoba, the Province has introduced legislation to return all provincial fuel tax collected from municipalities to local governments to address crumbling infrastructure. However naive, it is this author's belief that not enough credit is paid to the increased political authority of municipalities. If citizens are more confident with local leaders than with other orders of government, there will be greater calls for increased financial responsibility and power at the local level. ●