DO URBAN GOVERNANCE CHANGES AFFECT WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION?

A preliminary look at Toronto and London

ABSTRACT

In Toronto, little attention has been devoted to concerns raised by women's organizations over amalgamation. What have been the implications for social policy and for women in local office since 1997? The author compares urban governance in Toronto and London, England – both redesigned in institutional terms during the late 1990s – and explores patterns of women's election to public office and issue representation in the two cities. The author is grateful to Genevieve Johnson, Joy Fitzgibbon, Heather Murray and Tristan Fehrenbach for their assistance on the research side, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial support of this study.

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In early 1997, on the eve of forced municipal amalgamation in Toronto, a group of local women's organizations gathered signatures for a declaration opposing the elimination of borough government. Sponsored by the Women's Coalition for Local Democracy, the anti-megacity declaration asserted that women in Toronto had much to lose if amalgamation proceeded. The coalition predicted likely substantive losses in the social policy field, including on low-income housing, child care and public transportation issues, as well as probable setbacks at the level of numerical representation.

More than five years have passed since the coalition held a grand signing ceremony at Toronto City Hall on 12 February 1997, to launch the anti-amalgamation declaration. Yet relatively little analytic attention has been devoted to concerns raised by the group. To be sure, amalgamation went ahead, but what were its implications for social policy and for numbers of women in local office? How have developments in these areas in Toronto compared with those in other large cities that underwent local governance changes during the same period? In particular, how have women elsewhere fared when their central governments redesigned urban political systems?

This discussion opens with a brief overview of shifts in urban governance in Toronto and London, England during recent years. Using preliminary data from an ongoing comparative study, it explores patterns of women's election to public office and issue representation in the two cities. These cases were chosen because both are global cities, operating in larger Westminster-style political units, that were home to dynamic women's movements since the 1960s era of social movement mobilization. Moreover, both Toronto and London were significantly redesigned in institutional terms by their respective central governments during the late 1990s, albeit in divergent ways. The project concludes that women's numerical as well as substantive representation appeared to be considerably more robust under post-reform arrangements in London than under the amalgamation scenario in Toronto.

Urban Governance Changes

Both Toronto and London experienced significant shifts in local political structures as a result of decisions reached by their respective central governments. In the former case, Mike Harris' right-wing Ontario Conservative regime imposed municipal amalgamation on older downtown and inner suburban districts. This process eliminated existing local borough government in both areas, did not redesign the governance of Toronto's outer suburbs, and retained simple plurality electoral arrangements for all positions in the newly created megacity. In the older downtown and inner suburbs, far fewer locally elected positions were available after amalgamation than before. The top metropolitan mayoral position under the new scheme was won by Mel Lastman, a conservative suburban politician.

By way of contrast, Tony Blair's New Labour national government of the Third Way persuasion created a new strategic local authority for London, with a mayor and 25-member assembly to be elected by residents of inner and outer London. Since that city's existing borough system remained in place alongside the newly created Greater London Authority (GLA), the overall number of locally elected positions increased by more than two dozen. Most important, the new London mayor and 11 (of the 25) assembly members would be chosen using variations on European-style proportional representation schemes: supplementary vote in the case of the mayor and additional member with party lists for 44 percent of the

assembly. In 2000, the first London-wide mayoral campaign under these arrangements was won by Ken Livingstone, a left populist who ran as an independent candidate after being denied the official Labour party nomination.

From the perspective of women's political representation, the creation of the GLA was significant because it held out the promise of restoring a London-wide profile to issues of key concern to feminist activists. The Women's Committee of the Greater London Council (GLC), abolished along with other metropolitan council units by the Thatcher government in 1986, had been a leading campaigner for improved child care, social housing and public transit provision, and funded many local initiatives including a feminist planning group known as Women Plan London.

The latter inspired the establishment during the 1980s of a mirror organization called Women Plan Toronto; both groups shared a commitment to inserting women's safety, child care, housing and transportation concerns in urban planning discussions. By the early 1990s, Women Plan Toronto had branched out in the direction of encouraging greater female participation in local politics. In 1997, the group joined the Women's Coalition for Local Democracy, which sponsored the anti-amalgamation declaration described earlier in this discussion.

GLA creation also held out the promise of increased numerical representation for women in London. In contrast to single member plurality electoral arrangements that prevailed in Toronto, the scheme in place for the first London Assembly elections offered voters two choices, one for a constituency member selected on the basis of first-past-the-post, and the second for a London-wide party list. The latter scheme, under which 11 of the 25 assembly members were elected, ensured some measure of proportionality, and was expected to benefit smaller parties as well as female candidates.

What were the consequences of amalgamation and GLA creation for women's representation? The next section addresses this question with respect to one formal dimension of political citizenship, the election of women to public office at borough and municipal levels. The subsequent part examines substantive influence over urban public policy, in this case the ability of women's organizations to insert their perspectives about child care, safety, housing and public transit into the first official plans of the new Toronto and London units.

Electing Women to Public Office

During the period prior to Toronto's amalgamation, women held about one-quarter of the seats on six local borough councils, and about one-third of the seats on the municipal Metropolitan Toronto Council. After the megacity scheme was imposed by the province of Ontario, all six borough units were eliminated, and the number of elective local offices was more than halved. The increased geographical size and population of the metropolitan wards created under amalgamation, combined with the musical-chairs competition among incumbents that targeted a shrinking number of council positions and the enormity of the at-large mayoral constituency in the megacity (Canada's largest in terms of population), were all expected to hinder the election of candidates with limited financial resources, including women.

Consistent with this proposition, former downtown mayor Barbara Hall lost the first amalgamated mayoral election in 1997 to suburban North York mayor Mel Lastman; Lastman was reelected for a second three-year term in 2000. Approximately 30 percent of the 44 megacity council seats in 2000 were won by women, a figure which differed little from their roughly one-third share of seats under the old Metro arrangement. Yet this small quantitative gap likely masqued more significant disparities in political influence. For example, the executive clout of women under pre-amalgamation arrangements was considerable, given that two borough mayors out of six who held office in 1996 were female, including Barbara Hall. In addition, relatively few women on the new megacity council were high-profile feminists or progressives, and only one female, feminist and progressive member (Olivia Chow) came from a visible minority background.

By way of contrast, women won 40 percent of the newly created assembly seats in the first GLA elections in 2000, which employed partial proportionality arrangements. Two years later, female candidates won about 30 percent of council seats under first-past-the-post rules in the 32 London local boroughs. Parallel with Barbara Hall's experience in Toronto, Susan Kramer, the mayoral candidate of the Liberal Democrats in the first at-large, metropolitan-wide election in London, placed fourth in the first preferences count and was eliminated from the second round. Like Ken Livingstone, Labour MP Glenda Jackson sought the official party nomination for London mayor but, unlike Livingstone, she did not enter the field as an independent after losing the Labour contest.

Comparing the amalgamated Toronto council and Greater London Assembly units shows women's numerical representation was approximately 10 percent higher in the latter than the former in 2000. The presence of some proportional representation seats and the absence of incumbents in London, versus an undiluted plurality scheme and competition among incumbents for reduced seats over time in Toronto, may help to explain differing outcomes. Although men won mayoral office in both cities in 2000, executive control in Toronto rested in the hands of a conservative suburbanite with no formal cabinet organization, while Londoners elected a progressive populist whose advisory cabinet included 50 percent women, including the outspoken black Labour MP Diane Abbott as women and equality advisor.

Voice in Urban Planning

To what extent did the first official plans released by the Toronto megacity and Greater London Authority reflect the influence of feminist planning interests? The initial draft plan released in Toronto was a relatively brief, 99-page document that set out broad principles to guide future urban development. Among the most significant of the plan's objectives was intensified commercial and residential land use at particular locations in older downtown and inner suburban areas, where existing transportation systems were viewed as sufficient to accommodate additional growth.

The overwhelming focus of the 2002 Toronto plan remained the city's built environment, including land use at particular nodes, rather than the human consequences (for better or worse) of intensified development. The approach

to urban governance presented in the official plan was generally a hands-off one that privileged market forces. For example, at no point did the text prescribe aggressive intervention by municipal officials in such sectors as housing, transit, safety or child care. Instead, the language of choice and opportunity dominated, including in the title of Chapter 1 ("Making Choices").

Urban residents were generally referred to in the Toronto document as homogeneous "people" or, in the vision statement, "everybody," with rare exceptions in short passages dealing with the transportation of "people with disabilities," "the elderly" or "people with special needs." The particular characteristics of individuals in these categories were not discussed, even though elderly persons in Toronto in 2002 were disproportionately female, as were adult users of public transportation. Overall, the 2002 Toronto plan made no reference to women. It acknowledged the role of voluntary community action in one brief illustrative section on the Task Force to Bring Back the Don [River] and the Tree Advocacy Program, both of which were ongoing local environmental campaigns. The photograph accompanying the discussion showed five women planting trees, but the text described these participants simply as citizen volunteers.

By way of comparison, the 2002 London plan set out a more detailed (419 pages), directive and equity-oriented blueprint for intensified urban growth. The mayor's introductory vision statement emphasized a crucial interdependency among three key themes, namely economic growth, social inclusivity and environmental improvement. Sections devoted to housing, for example, established a target of 23,000 new homes per year, with half of these to be built for low-income families and essential workers (including nurses, police officers and school teachers). In the field of transit, the London plan recommended two new cross-London rail lines as well as a 40 percent increase in bus capacity by 2011.

Women received frequent and explicit recognition in the 2002 London plan, as one category within a larger group of disadvantaged "communities of interest and identity." According to the document, "the Mayor recognizes that there are particular groups of Londoners for whom equality of opportunity has more resonance than for others. This relates to those people who suffer discrimination, or have particular needs, as a result of their race, sex, disability, age, sexual orientation or religion" [Greater London Authority, The Draft London Plan, 2002, section 4C.12]. With reference to employment, women were described in the 2002 plan as disproportionately low-wage, less skilled workers, often holding public sector jobs, who confronted specific impediments to economic participation including limited child care provision and concerns about safety on public transit.

The contrast between Toronto's and London's 2002 official plans could hardly have been more stark. While the Toronto document referred not once to women, the London text offered multiple references to low-wage women workers, teachers, nurses, child care provision as a barrier to employment, and so on. The extent to which the documents laid out aggressive plans to increase the supply of affordable housing, or improve public transportation systems, also differed widely, with the London text consistently more expansive and interventionist in its approach. Finally, the discussion in the English plan of urban diversity and equality was far more analytic and interrogative than in the Canadian one; the latter simply asserted that Toronto was a diverse, multicultural city, apparently assuming that jobs, skills, housing, income and other attributes were distributed in an unproblematic way among urban residents.

Conclusions

As a preliminary review of one numerical and one substantive dimension of representation in two global cities, this discussion suggests women's citizenship status in London was considerably more promising, or less endangered, than in Toronto. As one part of significant governance changes that unfolded during the late 1990s, New Labour promised the residents of London a strategic metropolitan authority for their city. In subsequent elections, Londoners chose Ken Livingstone, a progressive populist and long-time left Labour maverick, as mayor. Women won 40 percent of Greater London Assembly seats in the 2000 elections, under a partial proportionality scheme. The Draft London Plan released two years later paid particular attention to the needs of disadvantaged urban residents, including women, and set out a vigorous agenda for improvements in such areas as affordable housing and public transportation.

By way of contrast, the Ontario Conservatives foisted an amalgamated arrangement on Toronto during the late 1990s, which eliminated local borough government and dramatically reduced the number of council seats. Municipal elections in 2000 (held under first-past-the-post arrangements) produced a Toronto city council in which women held about 30 percent of ward positions. The mayoral post was won in both 1997 and 2000 by Mel Lastman, a suburban conservative with a reputation as a flamboyant home appliance tycoon. The official city plan released in 2002 focused almost exclusively on creating an intensified built environment; it did not mention women, nor did it discuss any social aspects of urban development such as inclusion or inequality.

Obviously, a great deal that matters to women's citizenship in these two locations remains unknowable at this point. Can London's mayor follow through on his ambitious ideas about housing, transport, child care and skills training, in the absence of an autonomous budgetary base for many of these projects? Would a change of mayoral leadership in Toronto make much difference to women's citizenship prospects? How secure were the positions of senior women decision-makers in the Greater London Assembly? Would a new generation of diverse female politicians arrive on the Toronto municipal scene in the near future?

Although the data presented in this study remain preliminary, they tend to support both optimistic and pessimistic views of urban governance reform. As of 2002, there were reasonable grounds for hopefulness regarding numbers of elected women and the influence of feminist planning interests, particularly if observers focused on the specific example of the Greater London Authority. At the same time, evidence from Toronto presented a firm case for pessimism, since it demonstrated the degree to which numbers could plateau or decline, at the same time as substantive voice in the planning process could be virtually silenced.

The declaration of the Women's Coalition for Local Democracy on the eve of Toronto's amalgamation may, unfortunately, have been prophetic.