MAJOR CITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

ABSTRACT

The urban agenda has been largely ignored for too long, and putting it off any longer will not help the development of our cities for the 21st Century. A "New Urban Agenda" has been brought on by some serious problems including poverty, shortage of affordable housing, ageing infrastructures and inadequately-funded public transportation systems. What can be done to help our cities? First of all, argues the author, municipalities should have constitutional recognition as an order of government.

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The "New Urban Agenda" with its far-reaching issues regarding the management of our major cities in Canada is gradually making its way onto the radar screen and provoking discussion. It has been finally recognized that major urban centres are the catalysts of change and the drivers of the economy. In every corner of the globe, whether it be in Africa or North America, the focus for human, social and economic growth is in our cities.

Eighty percent of the population of Canada lives in urbanized areas, and slightly over fifty percent lives in four of the biggest cities, that is, Toronto, Montreal, Calgary and Vancouver. This fact alone indicates the undeniable importance of the urban agenda in an age of globalization, knowledge-based economies and the concentration of strategic service industries in large urban centres. Even though electronic, wireless and satellite communications eradicate time and distance between major cities and continents, they have also created concentrated centres for research, development and high-performance industries gravitating to urban areas. This phenomenon will continue to exist as interdependence and rapid change are ever-present in our lives.

This 21st century reality does not in any way diminish the importance of regions and rural areas in the global picture and greater scheme of things. It only serves to accentuate the need for balanced, integrated and coherent public policies which enrich and facilitate this interdependence at the three levels of governance, federal, provincial and municipal. The last half century has proven that hierarchical governments, especially at the provincial and federal levels with specific jurisdictional and legislative authority, have led to power bastions forgetting that citizens are the sole reason of their existence. It was the cities, towns and villages that made up the "stem cells" of our country creating the beauty, the strength and the diversity known as our Canada today. The common good should be the driving force leading to convergence on unity of purpose and objectives rather than the partisan geopolitical power struggles witnessed throughout the land.

The crucial need for co-operation, compromise and establishing a new paradigm for dignity, growth and prosperity of our cities and our country, all of humanity for that matter, seems utterly beyond the irrelevant exchanges witnessed in government assemblies. Political representatives give the impression of deriving their leadership and power from confrontation, intransigence and aggressive behaviour rather than the human qualities and values that marked many of the builders of this country. Might does not make right, and it never will. The present attitudes observed will make the whole house of cards crumble, not only in Canada.

The "New Urban Agenda" brought on by the serious problems created by poverty, shortage of affordable housing, ageing and decaying infrastructures, inadequately-funded public transportation systems, and the list goes on, has provoked, at least, the embryo of attention-getting it deserves in the last decade. The recession of the early 1990's was the first sign of impending disaster for the major cities across Canada. By 1993, unemployment, poverty, boarded-up buildings, decaying sewer pipes, roads, bridges and water-distribution systems along with insufficient revenues to correct what

needed fixing or funding triggered the first alarm bells. There was a flurry of activity at that time producing joint efforts and "concertation" bringing people as well as vital energies and resources together. The economy did pick up steam in the ensuing years providing some relief and getting us back on track. However, reducing deficits at senior levels of government and concentrating on economic development did not change the fragility of supporting cities with long-term structured, revenue-producing frameworks in order to move away from dependence on municipal taxes based on market-value assessments which were already overexploited. Market-value assessments on property are not the measure of wealth or the capacity of property-owners to pay their municipal tax accounts. Municipal taxes have become a mechanism for redistribution of wealth which is totally contrary to any democratic constitution. The municipal tax format is no longer used to support basic municipal services as it was originally intended to be used.

During the last year, the "New Urban Agenda" did provide impetus for several initiatives drawing closer attention to this vital issue which is the core of future success and prosperity. The Prime Minister's Task Force on Urban Issues and the TD Forum on Canada's Standard of Living Study both concluded on the urgent necessity to deliver a "new deal" for our cities. The submissions from business, labour, academics and all segments of Canadian society agree that all three "orders" of government have a crucial role to play if, the well-being of citizens and our cities is taken seriously. Health of citizens, quality of life, conditions that allow young people especially children to self-actualize, find their sources in our cities. The Federal Government has maintained a Department of Rural Affairs, but the fate of our cities gets lost in the shuffle and crossfire of federal-provincial infighting. Nonetheless, the fact that these two events took place sounded a wake-up call for all elected representatives who care about the survival of our cities.

What can be done to place our cities at the decision-making table on equal footing with provincial and federal partners? First of all, municipalities should have constitutional recognition as an order of government. The constitution as it presently stands, confines cities to the position of "creatures of the provincial governments". This lowly subjugation of cities leads to many of the insurmountable problems and challenges facing cities today. Provincial governments have treated municipalities neither gently nor with great generosity; in fact, provincial authorities always protected their own jurisdictions, their authority and their hierarchical interests. The jurisdictional powers of provincial governments take precedence over citizens' real needs and aspirations.

One of the most striking examples of patriarchal authority usurped by provincial authorities is the imposition of mergers or amalgamations of municipalities. This is not to say that mergers were not needed in some areas and regions of Canada. However, the use of legislative powers to impose mergers in the face of democratic principles which had no place in the process leaves a majority of citizens mistrusting their governments and politicians. And, the relationship of trust between citizens and their elected representatives is the foundation of a free and democratic society.

Worst still, in the spate of mergers taking place in recent years, no one has been able to demonstrate with solid proof that these result in savings, improved quality of life and the financial structures to better support the greater needs of these large urban municipalities. There are many factors which may theoretically justify mergers such as uniformization of services, geographic collaboration between centre cities and their suburbs as well as fairer allocation of resources throughout the larger area. Not one of the new cities created through mergers has produced economies of scale offsetting tax increases necessitated by the new and larger administrative structures. The increasing financial needs of major cities across Canada have merely been increased substantially due to the decisions of provincial governments which do not have the means to provide for their larger "creatures". Provinces were hoping that mergers would bring greater revenues to the former central cities, and ,in this way, spare the provinces the obligation of subsidizing these cities. The necessity of developing a "New Urban Agenda" is significantly greater now because of this provincial solution to their own financing problems and lack of vision.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) has been at the forefront of pressing governments to obtain constitutional recognition for municipalities giving them the status of order of government. No one needs another constitutional battle at this time, and we all agree on that. However, the urgent issues surrounding our cities will not evaporate until open dialogue and debate on the future of our cities are maturely and intelligently addressed. The urban agenda has been relegated to the back burner for far too long; putting it off any longer will not help the development of our cities for the 21st Century.

The FCM and the Big City Mayors must continue to assume leadership in this national issue. The federal, provincial and territorial governments alone cannot and will not find the sustainable solution to this problem. Cities, like the question of the environment and climactic changes, are everyone's concern and responsibility. We must formulate a national strategy to support our cities and make them healthy and viable within the present context of competition, global markets and greater security concerns. We have learned the hard way that economic development must go hand-in-hand with social development, and FCM along with its member municipalities have contributed to this essential ingredient in our communities. They, in many cases, have been innovators in responding to needs in new areas of activity which extend far beyond the offering of basic municipal services such as snow removal, water purification and distribution networks, cleaning streets, planting trees, and the lengthy catalogue of commonly known "municipal" services. The social, intellectual and health development responsibilities in a context of growing diversity of our cities have increased exponentially over the years without any new sources of revenues being factored into the equation of municipal budgets.



Vieux-Québec en hiver – photo de J-F Bergeron, Enviro Foto, copyright©2001 Office du tourisme et des congrès de la Communauté urbaine de Québec

Municipal authorities do not have the facility or the privilege of distancing themselves from the front-line of their citizens' complaints, pre-occupations or demands. FCM has consistently stressed the importance of the "order of government" closest to the people who experience daily the conditions of their neighbourhoods and local communities. The challenges of healthy, happy and safe communities are not faced by leaving the management and financing of cities to chance and solely dependent on municipal tax dollars. Again, it must be said that all levels of governance must share in the fiscal responsibility and accountability for achieving the goals and objectives associated with communities where citizens want to live and bring up their families.

Constitutional recognition of municipalities would allow cities a greater bargaining power with provincial and territorial authorities. It would also allow cities to enter into agreements directly with the Federal Government eliminating the turf wars which currently hinder the programs established by the central government to help these cities. The Federal Government Infrastructures Program is an excellent example of initiatives where provincial intervention often slows down the process or completely sideswipes certain deserving cities.

The most recent Throne Speech made reference to promised action on urban infrastructures which provoked the cry for a "new deal" for Canadian cities. It is to be hoped that in the period of time between the Throne Speech and the next election, this promise does not get lost in campaign rhetoric as citizens have so sadly seen in the past. Financing our cities, maintaining the Canadian standard of living and even enhancing it along with quality of life in our major cities cannot become part of empty political promises devoid of firm commitment and determination to deliver.

The *Star* (Toronto) columnist Christopher Hume best summed up the dire reality afflicting our cities in this way. "Until recently Canada had just two solitudes. Now it boasts three: the country, the provinces and the cities. Though none is doing well, Canadian cities are in a crisis so deep their future is at stake. Abandoned by Ottawa and provincial governments, they have been left to fill the void without possessing the means to do so."

At the hearings of the Prime Minister's Task Force on Urban Issues, the co-chair of the second annual Urban Summit, Jane Pepino declared, "The status quo is simply not an option for Canadian cities." To redeem the democratic potential of our cities, and our country, fundamental human values and the building of citizens' trust in government must be part of the other options.