But Not Much Has Changed



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The Jets left Winnipeg in 1996. Their many supporters claimed that, as a result of their departure, Winnipeg would become a 'second-class' city: young people would leave, business would dry up, life would never be the same. None of this has happened. Winnipeg is no more nor less a second-class city than when the Jets were here. Out-of-province migration, long a problem in Manitoba, has continued at roughly the same pace, and the provincial government — the same government that predicted economic disaster if the Jets were to leave — claims that business is booming. The dire predictions have simply not been borne out by the experience.

What is more, there is a broadly-based agreement in Winnipeg, even among avid Jets supporters, that the Jets' departure was, in the end, inevitable. 'We're sorry they're gone', most people say, 'but I guess we just couldn't afford to keep them here'. There is an acceptance, albeit reluctant, of what is now seen to have been inevitable. But what is interesting about the Jets saga is how little was learned from it.

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Opposition to spending vast sums of public money to save the Jets was led by a small citizens' group calling itself Thin Ice, of which I was a member. Thin Ice argued consistently that if there were many tens of millions of extra public dollars kicking around, they should be invested in the community, where they were sorely needed, not in NHL hockey. It was an argument about social justice and equity.

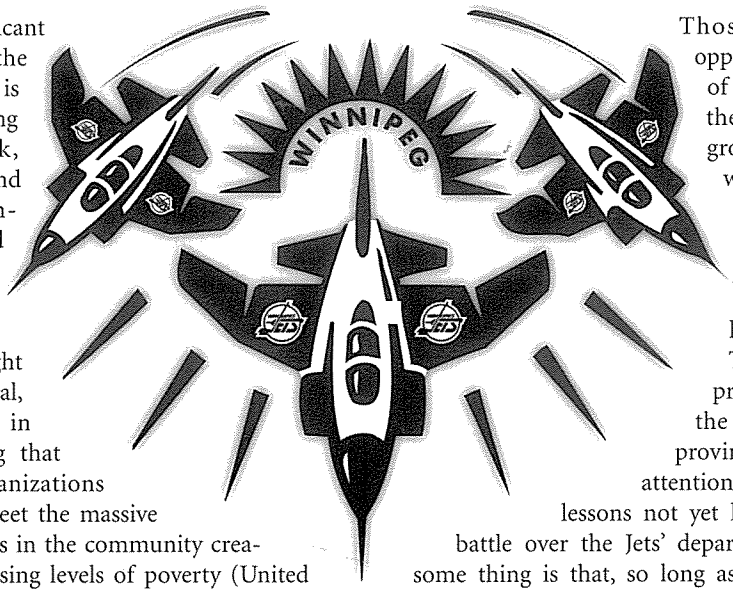
It was also an argument about urban economic development. Supporters of the 'Save the Jets' campaign, and especially the city's business establishment, claimed that public expenditure to save the Jets was justifiable, indeed necessary, for the city's economic future. That claim has now been shown to be without foundation, but the faith of the corporate elite in this type of economic strategy remains unshaken.

The strategy is the megaproject approach to urban economic development. Build or do something big, something that has a high profile and can boost the city's image. Build a tall office building, or a large downtown mall. Even better, build a new arena to save the Jets and 'put Winnipeg on the map'. Putting Winnipeg on the map is important because urban economic development is all about creating a 'good business climate' and boosting the city's image in order to attract capital from afar.

Their failure to save the Jets has not given the city's decision-makers a moment's pause as far as the merits of this approach to urban economic development is concerned. As I write this, we are six weeks away from the 1999 Pan Am Games, which Winnipeg will host. If one big, high-profile, image-oriented sports project fails, the city's business establishment has said, then let's try another. In excess of $150 million in public funds will be spent to enable Winnipeg to host the Pan Am Games for two weeks. It will, we are told, put Winnipeg on the map. The Jets may be gone, but the megaproject mentality remains firmly intact. One megaproject failed, so we're trying another. And if it fails, there will undoubtedly be yet another.

Spending vast sums of public money on glitzy megaprojects to boost the city's image and breathe life into the local economy is a flawed way to promote urban economic development. It's not that it doesn't 'work'. It achieves what it is intended to achieve. It creates benefits of various kinds for some, and drags many of the rest along with its boosterism and its appeals to civic pride. Winnipeg's business establishment has successfully used variants of this strategy throughout the entirety of the twentieth century. It's a safe bet that they will continue to do so in the twenty-first century. It's all they know, and from where they view the world, it works.

The problem is that this approach to urban economic development does not get at the roots of the city's most serious problems. In fact, it adds to those problems. It deflects public concern and scarce public dollars away from, to give just one example, the issue of high poverty rates. In 1996, the year the Jets left Winnipeg, over 50 percent of all households and over 80 percent of Aboriginal households in Winnipeg's inner city had incomes below the Statistics Canada low-income cut-off. This repre-



sents a very significant increase since the 1991 Census, and is a huge and appalling problem (Black, Luzubski, Shaw and Silver, forthcoming). The United Way, an organization not wont to make public statements that might be seen as political, issued a report in early 1997 saying that United Way organizations were unable to meet the massive and growing needs in the community created by ever-increasing levels of poverty (United Way of Winnipeg, 1997). A 1996 survey at Child and Family Services Winnipeg and CFS Central found that 92 percent of social workers who responded believed that demand for their services had exploded to such an extent — largely attributable to growing levels of poverty — that it was no longer possible for them to comply with all aspects of the Child and Family Services Act (CUPE, 1996, Appendix 4, P. 6). Many more such sources could be cited (see Silver, 1999).

There is, in Winnipeg, a desperate need for creative initiatives to turn around the rapidly escalating levels of poverty. That is why Thin Ice was opposed to using tens of millions of scarce public dollars to save the Jets. There were more pressing needs for that money.

Those needs still exist. In fact, they are growing. But the message continues to go unheard. In that regard, as in others, the Jets' departure has brought no change. It is not just that the predictions of mass exodus and business collapse have proved hollow, and that in fact many of those who made such predictions are now boasting about Manitoba's purportedly strong economy. It is also that poverty and the many problems it creates continue to grow, and even to approach crisis proportions, and yet these issues continue to be ignored by those who boast about the economy's strength. Far from having learned anything useful from the Jets fiasco, the city is about to bring to fruition yet another megaproject by hosting the Pan Am Games.

Those of us who opposed the spending of vast sums to save the Jets, on the grounds that there were better uses for the money, may have won that battle, but it seems we have lost the war. That there are more pressing needs for the city's and the province's money and attention are among the lessons not yet learned from the battle over the Jets' departure. The worrisome thing is that, so long as decisions about urban economic development continue to be made by the local business establishment, that lesson will never be learned. Glitzy megaprojects funded with other peoples' money work just fine for them.

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