

# A Decade of Urban Reform: A Paper

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by Lloyd Axworthy  
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The Institute of Urban Studies





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A DECADE OF URBAN REFORM

A paper by

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## A DECADE OF URBAN REFORM

Until the middle of the 1960's, cities in Canada nestled in a political backwater. Local government delivered services, swept streets and built roads with a minimum of political controversy. Local politicians prided themselves on "keeping politics out of city government" and carried out their tasks with either the solemn mien of a bank director or the harmless flamboyance of a carnival barker. Indeed the pallid cast of city politics in Canada was aptly reflected in academic treatments of the subject. What scholarship there was consisted usually of a detailed examination of administrative or structural minutiae, i.e., number of council meetings, etc., tinged at times with the presbyterian type invocations to adhere to principles of "good government."

The generally tumultuous period of the sixties however, brought a re-awakening that forced politics of Canadian cities out of the closet. A number of problems came to light. In 1967 the Annual Economic Council Report documented in convincing fashion what many others had begun to sense: urban growth was ill-managed; there was a shortage of housing; city finances were in a mess; transportation was in chaos; and government at all levels had very few answers. From the United States came the heady whiff of civil rights marches, student demonstrations and a challenging set of propositions about participatory democracy that started many Canadians, particularly the young, to think about the stiff hierarchical form of their own institutions. The

Federal Government, with mixed motives unleashed further disruptive elements in the urban scene as it gave life to a small band of community organizers in the CYC, supported new community organization through its OFY and LIP programs, and short-circuited the traditional housing and urban development approaches of CMHC when it let loose Mr. Hellyer and his Task Force.

In short order, a new and different set of individuals and interest groups entered the local political arena, challenging the veteran participants. There were new bands of citizens vying for a role in the planning of their neighbourhoods. Others fought city hall over issues of renewal or freeways. Reformers gained seats on City Council, and the mass media, the special interest journals and even some academics began to analyse and criticize the conventional practices and policies of the cities in Canada.

While there can be no claim that all these developments stem from the same <sup>cause</sup> ~~course~~ or were a cohesive, well planned movement of reform, they do add up to a general pattern of change in the process of urban politics. There was a certain unity of purpose in challenging the established rules of the system and the people who made the rules. There were certain common assumptions about the elite nature of decision making, the need to democratize the system and to change the equation of who gained the benefits and who paid the costs of government action in the urban areas. In many ways it resembled the earlier populist

movement that took place in Canadian cities some half century before.<sup>1</sup> At that time as well, there was a similar change of reform energy that altered the pattern of politics and ~~political structure~~<sup>IN</sup> of our cities, creating in its after effects the basic structures of the political system against which present reforms contend.

To some degree the ardor of this second wave of urban populism has now ~~also~~ cooled, and the tide of urban reform that it carried along has begun to ebb. The mid seventies is witnessing a different set of political conditions - restraint, retreat and retrenchment are the new hallmarks of political life in Canada. Many of those who were leading the way for urban reform find themselves out of step, disillusioned, or just plain weary of the effort. Yet, what has been achieved cannot be undone, and while the decade of urban populism may be drawing to an end, its impact upon the political structure of our cities remains. Just as that earlier reform period left its mark, so too has its latter day reincarnation.

For that reason it is time to begin to look at what took place and what legacy it has left; for within the experience of the last decade there are several lessons to be learned. There are many limits to such a review and while a sophisticated level of analysis is warranted, it will have to remain for future historians who can dissect with a clearer more dispassionate eye. It is an event still struggling with some vestige of life, much too recent to allow a coldly scientific autopsy.

1. Paul Rutherford, editor, Saving the Canadian City, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1974.

What can be ventured now is more of a late stage prognosis, designed only to analyse what has transpired and to see what life there may be left in the urban reform spirit and where it still might make itself felt. Thus the focus of the following treatment will be to assess what kinds of reform were attempted during the period, what each was able to achieve and what political situation now exists as a consequence of the reform efforts. If such an analysis can therefore point to what went wrong, what went right, where the state of urban reform is now, then it may be possible to prescribe where those who still believe in its tenets might direct their continuing efforts.

#### THE VARIOUS ROADS TO URBAN REFORM

All of us are familiar with the old story of the ten ~~king~~ wise men who were instructed by their king to describe an elephant. One examined the leg and said an elephant was like a tree; another examined the trunk and said it was like a snake, and so on. This might well be a proper introduction of the different directions urban reform took in Canada over the past decade. Depending upon one's initial view of what ails the city, or where one stood in the political spectrum, or whether one was a bureaucrat, political or activist, one advocated a very different strategy of reform. For example, if you were a proud product of the political science departments of Queens, University of Toronto, and Western, circa 1930 to 1960, then the problem was one of obsolescent government structures, and the solution was to re-arrange the machinery, generally in a regional way. On the

other hand, if you were a believer in the power-elite version of things, like James Lorimer and his crowd, then all evil resided in the forces of the property industry and all that would save the system was total socialism, or exchanging private oligopoly with a public monopoly. And there are several other variations and themes.

This might appear to suggest that there was not really anything that could be described as a unified urban reform movement. But even though it was multi-headed, there were some unifying themes and a related set of approaches that emerged at a roughly comparable time in the mid nineteen-sixties. To begin with, there was general agreement on the conditions affecting Canadian cities and the inadequacies of what were then the standard, conventional approaches applied by government. The cities were growing at an accelerating rate, accompanied by increasing shortages and escalating costs in housing, land and services. There was unmanaged sprawl occurring at the periphery of the cities and large scale developments being implemented at the core. Transportation systems were still geared to automobile movement and with some exceptions mass transit was ignored.

Such difficulties in the management of growth came as some surprise to Canadians, but not as much as the realization of just how wrongly-minded or inadequate were existing government responses. At a 1967 federal-provincial housing conference, the first of its kind to be called, the premiers left a day early in disgust when they



discovered just how bankrupt federal policies were in offering solutions to the increasing housing crisis. Urban renewal, heralded in the 1950's and early 1960's by local planners and CMHC officials as bringing about an urban renaissance, was increasingly seen by urban critics and by urban residents as an expensive program that did little to meet the needs of inner city residents. Public housing projects were criticized as being sterile and unsuitable for families. Efforts to limit the negative effects of large commercial developments were non-existent. City government was continually seen as having neither the will nor means to address the problem of planning or development and its ineptness gave rise to serious dissatisfaction on the part of those residents in urban neighbourhoods that had to bear the worst brunt of unplanned development, high density congestion, community deterioration and ever increasing traffic.

Feeding on these conditions was a different attitude towards government itself. During the sixties the venerable institutions of representative government had come increasingly under attack. Academic research played its part as a new breed of behavioural social scientists probed beyond the formal structures of government to discover the influence that economic power, social class, or bureaucratic control had in decision-making. From the American civil rights movement and anti-poverty organizations came the realization that government was not necessarily for the people, but in fact used its power as often as not to serve special narrow interests in the society to the disadvantage

of the poor and helpless. Their acts of civil disobedience and challenge to the established order caused reverberations north of the 49th parallel and many Canadians began to share a healthy sense of skepticism about the equity and justice of our form of supposedly democratically led government.

This mood was not one of complete negativism, however. For along with the skepticism went a highly idealistic theory of participatory democracy. Enunciated by student radicals in the early sixties and in part legitimated in the community action program of the American War on Poverty, there emerged a set of propositions about how people, especially the disadvantaged should be given the right to decide for themselves on those policies or programs that would affect them. It was not enough to elect someone, that kind of representation hadn't worked. People must become directly involved in planning, deciding and implementing for their own welfare in their own community and not rely upon elected surrogates or appointed bureaucrats.<sup>2</sup>

It was a return to a more ancient form of direct democracy and as it became propounded by various spokesmen it took on a degree of cogency and relevancy. In Canada, the idea of direct involvement by citizens was picked up by a variety of community organizations and was given direct expression in the first organizing effort of the CYC whose youthful organizers mobilized a number of challenges to

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2. For an important statement of this philosophy, see Carole Pateman, Participation and Democratic Theory, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1970.

local government. The Hellyer Task Force in its perambulations across the country in 1968 attempted to reach beyond the conventional network of professional experts and traditional interest groups and consulted directly with the people on the doorsteps and in the church basements of urban renewal areas and public housing projects. The report of the Task Force was affected by this direct grass roots ~~control~~ <sup>control</sup> and constituted a frontal attack on a number of existing policies reflected. And when the Federal Government decided to perk up employment through community initiated projects under LIP and OFY, it provided financial fuel for great numbers of Canadians to "do their own thing" as the vernacular of that time would have it.

This populist philosophy of power to the people became in part allied with a growing sense of public concern over matters of environment protection and the need for neighbourhood preservation. Growth during the fifties and early sixties had been seen as a national virtue. The pride of every mayor, premier, and prime minister was to cite statistics on population increase, new industries attracted and new developments underway. But, in the late sixties, early seventies, growth was seen as a mixed blessing. The new freeway also destroyed an old neighbourhood. The mega-complex of offices and apartments caused serious congestion. The new factory polluted the air. There emerged an increased awareness and renewed respect for what was old, graceful and uncluttered. This concern, primarily expressed by middle class urban residents found an easy marriage with the sentiments for increased citizen participation, for if the individual citizen had

greater say, then his or her neighbourhood could be conserved.

So, not only was there strong feelings over the failure of government to respond to urban problems, there was an alternative set of propositions about what could be done. Against the political groups that held power in city hall, provincial capitals, and in Ottawa, who held to the notion of growth, development, the efficiency of bigness and the sanctity of parliamentary government there emerged a counter movement that was against unplanned growth and preferred smallness to bigness, opposed the notion that public works were good works, and who wanted a change in the way decisions were made. As inchoate as it sometimes seemed, the theology of urban populism became a major fact of political life during this period.

#### THE THEOLOGY OF URBAN REFORM

A new theology usually has practitioners who follow slightly different gospels, and as the decade of urban populism evolved, four general areas of activity could be discerned. What they were and what they produced will now be examined.

##### 1. The Gospel of Government Reform

During this period there were an increasing number of efforts to restructure government institutions. This was in part a result of the lingering influence of earlier reform theories, which had become firmly entrenched in the good government postulates taught by several generations of Canadian local government and public administration faculties. If one could change the structure, then one could produce

reform and went the lesson in many political science classrooms and a goodly number of would-be public servants would learn their lesson well.

The most pronounced thrust of this kind of reform thought could be seen in provincial initiative to create various forms of regional or metropolitan governments. Nova Scotia established a Royal Commission on Local Government; New Brunswick undertook a wholesale reorganization of its local government structure; Quebec established the Montreal Community scheme; Ontario set up several new regional governments; Manitoba initiated Unicity; in B.C. there was the Greater Vancouver Regional District.

These efforts were designed to overcome the apparent weakness of local government fragmentation, and its accompanying problem of fiscal and economic disparities and unco-ordinated planning. It reflected the more conventional notions that what caused city problems was a malfunctioning in government machinery, and could be repaired by a new design. It was also a solution more compatible to the attitude of provincial officials who were less likely to want face the more intractable problems of social and economic disruptions.

While the inadequacy and partiality of this approach can be clearly seen, one cannot completely discount the efficacy of government reorganization in promoting a different style of urban politics. Institutions and structures do shape the flow of urban politics and do alter the advantages of certain groups vying for political power.

The change in ward boundaries in Toronto, for example, made it simpler for councillors representing a distinct neighbourhood point of view to gain election, compared to the older system of large wards that gave the advantage to the middle and upper income groups.

Furthermore, the reorganizations themselves showed the effects of the new populist mood. In the Winnipeg Unicity reorganization provision was made for Resident Advisory Groups that were to be established in each of the Community Committee areas as a means of closer contact by citizens with decision-makers. The Winnipeg scheme also included provisions for environmental impact statements on the city level, a legal instrument to give citizens more control.<sup>3</sup> In Vancouver, the GVRD undertook a large scale planning effort on regional priorities that included a range of public hearings, meetings and citizen consultations. In other words, there was a recognition that policy making had to include a closer and more accessible means of contact and consultation.

To a lesser degree, this orientation was also followed at provincial and federal levels of government. On both levels a number of advisory boards involving private citizens were established. The federal government also made an impact through its funding of different community organizations who in turn would use the money to lobby against government. Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation also caught the

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3. For more detailed examination, see Axworthy, Epstein, "Public Policy and Urban Neighbourhood," Canadian Issues, Volume 1, Number 1, Spring, 1975.

flavour of the times and began to give credence to neighbourhood planning groups and non-profit organizations. Its support of a community run renewal program in the Strathcona area of Vancouver is perhaps the most successful example. As well the amendments to the National Housing Act ostensibly recognized new priorities for citizen involvement, by including requirements for citizen participation in NIP programs, and offering more generous financial aid to non-profit community housing groups. How successful the implementation of these provisions will be remains to be seen.

In noting that there was some recognition of citizen involvement in the area of government reform, it is also more true that the major thrust of action on provincial and federal levels of government was to strengthen their own organizational regulatory and policy initiatives. Provincial governments either established new provincial housing corporations or expanded the duties of existing ones by extending their duties into land assembly, new communities, etc. The Federal Government reorganized and expanded CMHC and set up the Ministry of Urban Affairs which identified its initial role as establishing liaison with the other levels of government and initiating a good deal of heavy academic research. One of the tangible by-products of the new Ministry's efforts was the creation of the tri-level process of consultation between governments on urban matters, leading to a series of generally closed sessions of government officials on pressing city matters. Thus, while there was a good deal of lip service given to the rights of citizens to be involved,

the overall tendency of government action in this period was to enhance the role of the bureaucracy.

The thrust of reform in the area of government reorganization and restructuring had mixed results. There was an obvious recognition that the new demands of urban populism should be heard, and the streets were full of government officials, consultants, task forces and commissions talking to the citizens. Some of their discussion did some good and changes in government structures, i.e. RAGs and in some cases programs, i.e. NIP, showed the influence. But, it was all done very carefully within the boundary of traditional government theories of representative government. Private citizens could be more openly consulted but they were not to make decisions.

On the periphery of the government apparatus there were some public officials who went further than this and gave support to citizen groups. The CYC was allowed to organize (until 1976), and some native groups, consumer associations, and environmental groups were given money to lobby. And, as part of the restructuring process certain new legal, fiscal and administrative weapons were introduced or talked about. Public hearings on planning matters became widely used, providing slightly more access to the public than had been there before. Planning reports were required by law to be made public and accessible under some of the new planning acts passed in the provinces. Environmental impact statements and freedom of information proposals prompted some debate and discussion. These can be considered as a form of progressive movement towards opening the decision-making systems.



But, against such achievements would have to be measured the equally strong movement toward increased bureaucratization and lack of administrative accountability and top-down decision making. While there may have been many more advisory boards, task forces and public hearings, the record of their having any real influence is less than outstanding.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, efforts to introduce structural changes encompassing citizen involvement were often met with hostility by senior civil servants and politicians. In Winnipeg, for example, the innovative RAG structure has atrophied for lack of provincial or city support; the environmental impact requirements were ignored; and the City fathers established an administrative district system that had no correspondence or accountability to the community committee areas where supervision by elected representatives and resident advisors was supposed to occur. In other words the structural reforms were only as good as the political process that worked within the local area, and if there was little base for reform support, few reforms took place. This points to the obvious limitation of the restructuring approach to effect change.

## 2. The Gospel of Community Power

Within the ranks of urban populists, little faith was placed in the notion of change through structural reform anyway. That was an activity for old line reformers. A much more important thrust, borrowed fundamentally from the American Experience was the idea of community power.

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4. For an example of the illusory sense of participation, a personal experience was the National Committee for Habitat. For Committee comments see: Habitat and Canadians: The Report of the Canadian National Committee, January, 1976.

The central tenet of this notion was that people should have direct participation in making decisions that affect their community. This could be achieved through the establishment of comprehensive all purpose neighbourhood governments chosen from the community<sup>5</sup> or, on a more limited scale, the control over specific institutions such as schools, or programs in fields such as housing renewal, or health, etc.<sup>6</sup>

In the United States there had been a number of initiatives, particularly under the Community Action Program, where local groups of disadvantaged blacks or poor people took over many of the traditional functions of local government and through Community Development Corporations managed their own renewal activities. They were to control their own redevelopment, not the politicians or the planners or the federal bureaucrats. There was a good deal of criticism of such an approach,<sup>7</sup> and a number of reported failures.<sup>8</sup> But the idea of community control - community power did spawn a wide variety of self-help housing, renewal, health and economic development activities throughout the U.S.A. and even when the Nixon-Ford administrations withdrew their support and

5. Milton Kotler, Neighbourhood Government: The Local Foundations of Political Life, (New York: The Bobbs Merrill Company), 1969.
6. Robert Aleshire, "Costs and Benefits of Citizen Participation," Urban Affairs Quarterly, Volume 5, Number 1, June, 1974.
7. The most famous is Daniel Moynihan, Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty, (New York: The Free Press), 1969.
8. See R. R. Burton, Harvey Garn, "Community Development Corporations: A New Approach to the Poverty Problem," Harvard Law Review, 82, January, 1969, pp. 644-667.

funding, real achievements have continued.

In this country, the notion of community control gained a following and many of the techniques of community organizing were quickly borrowed. One major difference is that resources and support for such activities as community development corporations and community action programs were never part of official federal programs as they were in the United States, although the federal Canadian authorities inadvertently helped give impetus to the movement. As previously mentioned, the CYC was one of the early agencies to take up the idea of community power and implant it among local groups they organized in urban areas. Thus the Trefann court residents in Toronto, who very early on in the mid sixties began a series of demands to control the planning and redevelopment of their area, were helped in their efforts by CYC workers, as were many other initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

Another early and somewhat successful example was the Strathcona Property Owner and Tenant Association group in East Vancouver. Their efforts began first as a protest against a public housing project being placed in the predominately Chinese community. They gained the ear of federal housing authorities and the federal Minister of Housing and were given over two million dollars to manage a program of rehabilitation and renewal of their own community. They are still in business today, undertaking a variety of housing and recreational activities.

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9. See Graham Fraser, Fighting Back: Urban Renewal in Trefann Court. (Toronto: A. M. Hakkert Limited), 1972.

One of the most ambitious efforts at developing a broad-based community organization, representing a wide variety of neighbourhood groups and agencies, was the Riverdale Community Organization in Toronto, sparked by the Alinsky-trained Don Keating. From 1970 to 1972, the umbrella group and a number of affiliated organizations were active in confronting city officials and private businessmen on a number of fronts, with the purpose of creating a full scale community organization that would ensure that local residents would be the prime decision makers on matters affecting their own community. It was perhaps the most notable effort to embody the notion of community control, but eventually floundered through a combination of erratic funding, opposition from city politicians and officials and internal disputes. But, it remains as a very dramatic example of how to build a system of community based decision making that stands in clear contrast to the conventional system of representative democracy.<sup>10</sup>

These were not isolated examples. In almost every Canadian city one could find neighbourhood groups that took on direct responsibility for planning and development. There are now a number of non-profit community housing groups. The native people have over nine non-profit housing corporations working in urban areas. There are community run health centres, day care centres, employment and retraining programs, all fulfilling a task otherwise performed by government and in general supported by government funds.

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10. Don Keating, the executive director of Riverdale has written an illuminating account of this experience. See Donald R. Keating, The Power to Make It Happen, (Toronto: Green Tree Publishing Company Limited), 1975.

The rationale for such community self-help activities goes back to pretty basic precepts, perhaps best articulated in this country by the Antigonish movement in Nova Scotia: that it is better to enable people to help themselves than to provide the help. A man or woman who contributes some effort to provide his or her own shelter has more respect for it than if they are just given a key. Those who take a role in planning their own community have a stake in what goes on. It is the process of self help that is just as important as the actual service or product that is being delivered.

As important as this concept is, and as useful as have been the many efforts at community action that have emerged in this country, the performance has fallen sadly short of expectations. Certainly the idea of groups of citizens becoming the dominant decision makers in their community has never been realized in the country, even in an experimental way.

In those cases where there have been efforts at self-help activity there is too often an accompanying tale of frustration in coping with the need to secure government funding and with a variety of rules and regulations and with opposition from public officials, politicians and often the media.

Community self-help organizations in our urban areas have not yet been accepted as an important, vital ingredient in creating a more democratic system. As a result the community organizations live a precarious existence. They still battle the deeply embedded

notion that decisions are made by politicians and officials, not people. Their funding is capacious and niggardly, pointing to the need for more effective legislative guarantees and clearly earmarked sources of funds. And the prime basis of support for community organizations to bring about community groups has suffered in federal cut backs on LIP grants and the cancellation of CYC.

Nevertheless, the limited achievements of the community self-help sector has had an impact on the urban political process. They have in many instances been able to offer alternative modes of urban development or delivery of services to the traditional form of government directed programs and in so doing have provided groups of low income people the chance to stand on their own feet and take responsibility for their own communities. This has often provided a brake to the unilateral decision of city officials or development forces and caused different considerations to be raised in planning decisions.

Out of such experience have also arisen new political leadership and new political pressure groups. The very act of organizing to become involved in the planning of a neighbourhood or a housing project imparts skills, confidence and sense of purpose. The experience of trying to secure some right of self-determination and being rebuffed can lead one out of lethargy and into political action. In the early days of community organizing the spokesman or political champion was an outsider, often a middle class professional or organizer who worked with the group, but the political foot soldiers from lower income

areas have begun to learn the tricks of the trade. Perhaps then the most significant influence of the community power self help group, is the way they have affected the political process.

### 3. The Gospel of Community Protest and Politics

Perhaps the most visible aspect of urban change over the last decade has been the drama of protest - urban reform politics. The heroic new mayors that appeared in Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, and Toronto; the new urban reform groups capturing seats on councils; the innumerable marches on city hall, to stop the bridge or expressway - this has been an important part of the urban political scene. The emergency of new political actors in the urban scene has a wider base, however than that of the community self-help groups described above. There is also a larger constituency of protest committees and rate payer groups, environmental organizations and civic good government groups. Oftentimes the focus of their coming together is a specific policy conflict or issue - a Spadina expressway, a downtown development project, a railway relocation scheme. The underlying sense of commitment is a feeling against growth, against gargantuan projects, against bureaucracy and for small scale things like conservation and preservation of older neighbourhoods. It grows out of some new political realities in our cities. Demographically there are more people occupying high density areas of our cities, the young unmarried, the older single people; while still middle class they are becoming radicalized to a degree.

The existence of a growing base of urban voters who, because of age, location and self-interest are now prepared to support reform politics is a very critical political factor, often overlooked in the various interpretations of political change in cities. As demographic studies show large areas of the inner city are now populated by young people below the age of thirty, old people above the age of fifty, who are tenants and relatively sophisticated in a political sense. They are the ones who are not tied to the same property and economic interests as their parents, or if they are older "empty nesters" now find that being subject to the whim of a landlord is different than being a property owner. There are the people who don't want highways through their areas and want to preserve some degree of neighbourhood amenity. Match them up with lower income people who are disaffected and there is a potential base for political reform, if it can be mobilized.

In some cities it has been. The Toronto experience is a well known example of how the population in the inner city became more conscious of city matters, with a variety of groups springing up to oppose downtown development, freeway projects, and renewal efforts. From this base a few councillors were elected with a strong radical-reform bias and in 1972 a mayor and majority of Council were elected on the grounds that they would slow development and apply a different standard of measurement to city policies and programs. To a lesser degree the TEAM group in Vancouver gained control in Vancouver, and there is even a burgeoning reform group challenging the imperial mayor of Montreal, Jean Drapeau.



Thus reform politics is now a continuing fact of life in cities and its influence seeps into other political arenas. One can now find across Canada a selection of elected members, existing in all parties or with a non-partisan label who espouse urban populist arguments and in fact try to live by them. They oppose the idea of growth for its own sake; they propose that inner city areas be developed in economic and social ways not just through physical reconstruction. They question public giveaways to the developers and suggest ways of making government more accessible and accountable. While by no means in a majority, this loose coalition of reform politicians are changing the agendas of political debate.

The accomplishments, in fact, are quite tangible. Toronto and Vancouver have established their own non-profit housing corporations to supply needed low-income accommodation in ways that are generally compatible with neighbourhood needs. There are encouraging efforts to control unrestricted development in downtown areas through methods of down zoning and tough development plans. There are some painful efforts to come to grips with traffic congestion and the encouragement of new schemes of public transit. And, there are efforts to control speculative land dealings on the fringe and undertake effective land use policies. Thus the reform political movement in different cities at different times has made an impact.

But, it would be wrong to herald this as an irreversible tide. To begin with there are many cities where the reformers are non-existent

or are a very small minority. The City of Toronto is generally the exception to the rule, and in places like Winnipeg, Regina, Halifax, Edmonton and others the political system is still dominated by old time political action.

Furthermore, what reforming zeal there was is on the ~~wane~~<sup>wane</sup>. Crusading is a tough business and as the original excitement wears off it becomes a succession of small, weary battles. On the local levels, councillors are generally not sustained within any coherent party system, so the battles are often fought alone or in a shifting set of coalitions. And the pay is generally not very good. So, as the rewards begin to pale, the disillusionment sets in. Thus, the continual growth and development of an urban reform style of politics is presently very much in question.

Finally, one of the real questions about urban politics is, what difference does it make? There may be some changes in the substance of some programs and policies, but the fundamental issue raised in the early years of urban populism, over who has power and who makes decisions remains unanswered. So far the record of reform politicians in bringing about changes in government to decentralize decision making and transferring power into the hands of those who don't have it, is not very good.

#### 4. The Gospel of Community Communication

Communication is a critical weapon of modern day politics. The influence of the media is well understood as is the power of the

written word in journals, books, pamphlets or whatever. The early civil rights activists understood they could multiply their power a thousand fold by insuring that a television news camera was invited to the local demonstration, and the local community activists have utilized the mimeograph machine and in some cases the video tape recorder as their own form of equalizer with the bureaucracies downtown. The emergence of a communication network to carry the reform message, and the emergence of a coterie of academics, journalists, pamphleteers who have supplied the message are one of the major characteristics of the reform decade and one whose influence may in the long run be the most pervasive.

Until the mid 1960's, communications and information on urban issues in Canada had all the meaning and relevance of a report to the shareholders. There was some turgid treatment of local government in the academic journals, and some whimsical treatises on English style planning in the professional journals. Research was limited and very much dominated by the beaux arts philosophy of CMHC advisory groups who paid for most of it. There was virtually no treatment in magazines, radio or television, and the daily press tended to reflect a chamber of commerce boosterism philosophy by carrying huge spreads on every new development as if it was one more sign of the coming of the millenium.

The first real break in this pattern came with the Economic Council Report in 1967,<sup>11</sup> which contained a concise chapter detailing

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11. Economic Council of Canada Fourth Annual Review, Queen's Printer, Ottawa, 1967.

the facts and figures on urbanization in Canada and spelling out the actual and potential woes. This was an important contribution as it provided the first real factual information to buttress the intuitive sense of unease that was felt by a few in the planning and academic professions about our urban situation. It also provided the ammunition for the first real serious opposition attack on government housing policy in the House of Commons.

Government documents continued to play an important role in shaping opinion. The Hellyer Task Force Report<sup>12</sup> was a sharp attack on many conventional urban programs such as urban renewal and public housing and generated a relatively fierce debate on the issue. The Urban Canada series<sup>13</sup> of papers edited by Harvey Lithwick, provided again a valuable source of information and the beginnings of a structural form of thought on urban matters. Michael Dennis and Susan Fish's major study of housing and urban development policy in Canada<sup>14</sup> became the new bible for setting forth a progressive social gospel in these policy areas.

Equally important as the documents themselves was the fact that their creation required the mobilization of a number of able minds. The infusion of public funds into urban research in this period created in effect a number of crash post-graduate courses in the urban field

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12. See Federal Task Force on Housing and Urban Development, (Ottawa: Queen's Printer), 1969.
  13. Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Urban Canada, Volumes 1-6, (Ottawa: Queen's Printer),
  14. Michael Dennis, Susan Fish, Programs in Search of a Policy, (Toronto: A. M. Hakkert Limited), 1972.

that spawned a whole new generation of thinkers and doers. Looking at the present crop of material being produced in urban research and writing, it is apparent that many of the authors received their first real initiation as part of one federal study team or another.

At the same time as this was happening, the various effects of community action, neighbourhood renewal, or protest politics were generating their own host of commentators, interpreters and recorders. To fight Spadina there had to be research on urban transit. To fight the latest initiative at commercial downtown development, one had to examine the property industry, etc. So there began to emerge a number of community organizers, University research institutes, and public interest groups that began to write of their experience and these began to appear in the smaller journals and magazines.

The next step in the evolution was for the popular media to pick up the urban populist frame of reference and use it to examine the cities. Newspapers began to probe city hall and expose the deals and duplicities, and there began to emerge a steady stream of articles in each and every city recording the actions of the local neighbourhood groups and protest organizations.

The same spirit emerged in the classrooms of universities, community colleges and planning schools. Course curriculums began to include discussion of advocacy planning, participation, and local government reform. In a very short time this has produced a generation of planners, architects and junior civil servants who, if not reformed

in the performance of their duties, are aware of what the reform message is about.

Thus, in a very short period there evolved a loose network of people in various capacities as communicators, who share an urban populist frame of mind. They obviously disagree amongst themselves and there are some bitter debates. But they are slowly changing the consciousness of Canadian citizens about the problems of Canadian cities and the option of solving them in a different way.

##### 5. The Assessment

What is described above, in obviously a summary way, represents the different elements of what can be seen as a movement of urban populism that has been at work in this country over the past ten years. Each of the elements is not a discrete separate set of activities. In the reality of our cities there is a number of inter-relationships between the different people who share a populist view, and the transference and exchange in a number of roles. The activist becomes an organizer and before long sits on City Council. What is important to assess beyond this description is what has been achieved. After all the sound and fury, what is left? Are the cities now a better place? Are decisions made more democratically? Is urban government now better managed, more effective? Have citizens benefited by what has taken place? Definitive answers to such questions are difficult to supply as we are still too near and involved with what has been going on, either as participants or recipients to be totally objective. But some tentative conclusion should be possible, and to that task this essay now turns.

CONCLUSION

First, there has been a substantial shift in the agenda of political debate and public discussion. Issues of growth, land control, neighbourhood preservation and public transit, which just a decade ago were missing from any public forum, are now widely debated. Furthermore, the last decade has seen a number of public policy initiatives taken to meet the issues. The federal government has brought forward a rewritten National Housing Act and is tentatively moving toward some form of population policies. Several provincial governments have considered or are considering new planning acts containing stricter measures for land control, and in some cases recovery measures on land speculation. In cities, there is certainly a greater sensitivity to neighbourhood conservation matters. The emergence of municipal housing agencies and the introduction of Neighbourhood Improvement Programs that upgrade and not destroy are steps forward.

This is not to say that the steps taken represent major alternatives in policies and programs, far from it. There is still far too much development that is destructive and still far too many areas of need that go unattended. For example, the incidence of poverty and disadvantage in our central cities is growing worse year by year. There are increasing disparities between the income and life style of inner city minorities, and those living in the suburbs. The major changes going on in our inner cities, with a much greater variety of people with different needs requires very different responses in the planning and delivery of fire and police services, educational and social programs, housing and renewal efforts - all

of which must be fine-tuned and decentralized to meet the intricate texture of the inner city. Most importantly there must be economic development programs for our inner cities to provide jobs and economic opportunities. None of these priority issues are being met.<sup>15</sup>

The degree to which they will be addressed depends in large part on two other essential parts of the urban populist platform - the reform of institutions and the redistribution of political power. Here the achievements of the past decade are dubious. As previously mentioned, the major thrust of reform of institutions was in the creation of regional governments. This has led to ~~an~~ increasing centralization of power by civic and provincial administrations ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~creation~~ ~~of~~ ~~regional~~ ~~governments~~. Efforts to introduce measures into the structure of government that would improve access and provide greater accountability are few and far between. Efforts under NIP programs to include citizens have generally been perfunctory. The RAG system in Winnipeg is limited by resources and treated with little respect by elected or appointed officials.

The emergence of local level community councils or neighbourhood city halls (on the community level) are almost non-existent. The only area where there has been some signs of change is in the increased interest in such devices as freedom of information laws, and environmental

15. For an examination of some of these needs and how they constitute a need for basic change in planning and delivery of city services, see Lloyd Axworthy and Pat Christie, Winnipeg's Core Area: An Assessment of Conditions Affecting Law Enforcement, (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, University of Winnipeg), October, 1975.



impact, requirements which, once in place could open up the political system and break down the monopoly of information that constitutes a major power base of government.

Perhaps the most important question is whether there has been any shift in the power relationships in cities. One of the common attitudes of urban populists beginning in the sixties was the domination of city politics by economic and social elites, and the relative powerlessness of most urban residents. Since then there have emerged two trends that can be seen as challenging the hold of elites. One is the emergence of a number of new groups and organizations that represent the disadvantaged, or groups that have a community base. There are now a growing number of organizations that manage their own housing, credit, or health services, and one might expect that they have altered to some degree the decision-making process.

But, such groups are still struggling. Funds are hard to get. There is a retrenchment in government support. The older breed of community organizers who provided much of the stimulant have now become authors or have retrenched to the corridors of academe, and there doesn't appear to be a new generation to take their place.

Furthermore, such groups never made the breakthrough of becoming a real power bloc that could substantially alter the locus of decision making. The idea of creating a broad based community organization like that of Riverdale which would take over and decide

what would happen in a particular area has not come to fruition. The notion that the representative elected-administrative system makes decisions, with community groups playing the role of pressure points is still paramount.

One reason for this is that as urban reform politics grew out of community power movements, it did not carry with it any goals for changing the nature of decision making. The reformers who got elected would fight to oppose developments and support citizen groups. But rarely did they make any striking effort to dismantle the conventional system of hierarchal top down decision making.

In this sense the achievement of urban reform politics has been almost nil. The reform politicians have challenged many traditional outlooks and practices and made city government more responsive to contemporary issues. But they are still making decisions for people, not enabling them to make decisions for themselves. So, there really hasn't been a major change in the power relationships for urban society nor the institutions through which those relationships work.

But, is this a failure of the goals and ambitions of those who dreamed of a new order of participation by people at the local level? Not necessarily. What has happened in this first decade is that a number of pre-conditions for major changes in our political system had to be met. There had to be a challenge to entrenched ideas. There had to be the emergence of activists and thinkers who

could point out the contradictions between the precepts of democratic theory and what really existed in an urban society. There had to be the entrance of new people into the political arena. As Thomas Kuhn points out in his book on how change has taken place in the structure of the scientific world, and by parallel, the political world, the established paradigms must first be revealed as not adequate to explain a new reality and there must be a breed of challengers to bring these inadequacies to light.<sup>16</sup>

It is this stage in the process of political change that has now been reached as a result of the turbulence in ideas and actions caused by the urban populist movement over the past ten years. What now awaits is the creation of a new paradigm, the framework of a new system of ideas, institutions and activities to govern our urban areas. The rough hewn ideas about participation, community control, decentralization, government accountability must be explicitly set out in working, operational terms and become part of the political agenda. The rhetoric must translate into realistic proposals about how a new system will work, how it can be implemented, how much it will cost.

The romantic ideals of the mid-sixties should now become working models in the seventies. And those working models should then become central to the reform initiative. This is where the new work of

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16. Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1970.

researchers, communicators, and innovators become important. From these must come the outline for the new system laid out in both theoretical and practical terms. As John Maynard Keynes revolutionized economic thought and practice in the 1930's, there must be a similar alternative in our notion of government and politics, in theory and practice, to fit the urban realities of the 1970's.

The urban populists - the urban reformers of the past decade have opened the way for major change. The imponderable is whether there will be a new generation of activists, thinkers and politicians to carry it through.