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Review of *Alberta's Local Governments: Politics and Democracy* by Jack Masson

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Alberta's Local Governments: Politics and Democracy. Jack Masson with Edward C. LeSage Jr. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1994. xii+603 pp. Notes, tables, bibliography, and index. \$C29.92 paper (ISBN 0-88864-251-2).

The authors, of the University of Alberta, have presented here a lengthy examination of democracy and political practice in the province's rural and urban communities, essentially from the 1880s to 1994. In addition to the communities themselves, the authors also examine the relations between municipalities and the provincial government, the growth of greater local

self-government, representation and accountability, the territorial decentralization of municipal economic activity, and the recent transfer of the costs of local government from the province to municipalities.

Organized by major subject, subdivided by minor subjects, and only occasionally employing historical analysis, the work is in general a summary of local government and local-provincial relations since World War Two, with a heavy emphasis on the 1980s. Legislation predominates as the driving force behind the subject matter's description and analysis. Curiously, the study's relationship to Professor Masson's previous book on *Alberta's Local Governments and Their Politics* is left unclear; the earlier volume is even omitted from the bibliography.

The chapters are relatively traditional in a book of this genre: democracy and theories of local government, intergovernmental relations, urban governmental structures, rural and evolving forms of local government, governmental reorganization, policy makers and democracy, bureaucratic behavior and democratic institutions, interest groups and democracy, parties, representation and elections, finance, democracy and policy making, municipal activities, planning and democratic institutions, and education politics and government. The notes are extensive, including many valuable explanatory discussions, and the bibliography is exemplary, citing abundant historical as well as political sources, books, articles and theses (pp. 561-85). There are numerous tables, chiefly fiscal, and an appendix with a structural analysis of party politics in Edmonton, Calgary, and Lethbridge since 1907 (pp. 459-74). An excellent comprehensive index, including matter in the notes, completes the volume.

Alberta's Local Governments: Politics and Democracy is animated by two themes: first, that the development of local government in the province owes more to innovation than to established models; and second, that the role of elected councillors is meant to encourage direct public participation in policy making and administration. Both themes are well illustrated throughout. What is missing, perhaps, is a comparative focus on two levels: other prairie provinces, and comparable jurisdictions on the other "Great Plains" below the 49th parallel.

Although the study's organization might suggest a large amount of overlap, rarely does this occur. Moreover, the writing is eminently clear throughout. If there is an area of controversy, it may well inhere in the authors' conceptions of the current direction of Alberta politics and of its local governors. The view that Albertans are skeptical of the viability and democratic practices of their local governments is more germane to the

provincial level than the municipal. The forces of privatization are perhaps weaker than given credit for in this volume. The downsizing of school and hospital boards may be motivated more by rural versus urban interests in the Conservative Party than by financial costs and administrative efficiencies. Finally, whether the province's municipalities have endured hardships in the 1980s not faced since the Great Depression is debatable.

However debatable some of the authors' conclusions may be, one is particularly poignant. Masson and LeSage advance the hypothesis that Alberta's citizenry has come out of its long sleep of complacency. Armed with higher standards of investigative reporting in the news media, an increasing proportion of the population is becoming vigilant and "moving toward grassroots democracy and local self-determination" (p. 457). No observer, least of all those within the Reform Party, would argue otherwise. **Louis A. Knafla**, *University of Calgary, Alberta.*