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BOOK REVIEW

Sandra Breux and Jérôme Couture (ed).

Accountability and Responsiveness at the Municipal Level: Views from Canada

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018.

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This book of readings attempts to measure the quality of representation and democracy at the local level in Canada through an examination of the concepts of accountability and responsiveness. The three sections into which the book is organized discuss political parties at the local level, the types of local politician, and the impact of multiple delivery mechanisms. As will be evident from the summary which follows, the variety of authors involved in a book of readings leads to varied and at times conflicting views on subjects. This is not necessarily a bad thing if it prompts the reader to pause and consider the merits of the differing points of view, but it does mean that one needs to withhold final judgment on any particular issue until all of the material is read.

Political Parties

Chapter 1 starts with the premise that a non-partisan system (most commonly identified as one without organized political parties on council) is expected to lead to more responsiveness and accountability. The former is easily understandable since individual councillors are free to respond to the views and concerns of their local electorate whereas councillors who belong to a local political party are constrained by a requirement to support whatever position their party might take on local issues.

However, the suggestion that non-partisan systems also lead to more accountability is surprising and puzzling. On municipal councils consisting of individual councillors not organized within political parties there is no governing group nor is there any opposition group subjecting proposals to scrutiny and offering alternatives. On such a council everyone is responsible for everything, which also means that no one is really responsible for anything. Pressed by local citizens about some issue, councillors can easily deflect blame by claiming that they were all for it but couldn't get "the others" to agree. Unless there is a recorded vote, municipal records only indicate whether a motion carried or not; there is no indication of how members voted.

I suppose that an extremely dedicated local citizen could attend every council meeting (or watch every meeting on television if available) and attempt to record whose hands went up (or didn't) when votes were called, but such hardy souls would be few and far between (and desperately in need of other hobbies and interests). Very controversial issues that get significant media coverage may identify some councillors who were actively promoting or opposing the matter at hand, but that is also a hit and miss proposition.

Chapter 3 offers a different perspective on this issue by reporting that one can expect greater accountability and responsiveness when a political party holds a majority of seats on council. But it makes the important

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distinction that such parties should be local in nature. It is critical of situations in which national parties run candidates in municipal elections, arguing that the nationalization of local elections has a negative effect on accountability.

However, the preceding chapter (p. 49) offers the contrary view that “for the partisan model to work at the local level, elections taking place there should be in line with those of the other levels of government.” If national parties present candidates for municipal election, we are told, the result is parties or coalitions whose positions on the political spectrum are well known to the voters. I would argue that if a partisan council is to be accountable locally, it should not have any connection to the political parties found at other levels of government. I will never forget arriving in Britain in 1967 to begin my doctoral studies just after Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson had reluctantly devaluated the British pound. In the subsequent municipal elections, Labour Party members on local councils experienced widespread defeat—not because of how they had handled local issues but because the British people were angry about the increased cost of living arising from the devalued currency. Political parties bring accountability to municipal government if they are purely local parties focused on local issues.

Local Politicians

Chapter 4 analyzes the political careers of all local elected representatives in Edmonton and Calgary between 1885 and 2015. It found that turnover on municipal councils decreased and that the re-election rate of incumbents increased (which would seem to be inevitable given the first finding). It also noted that many municipal councillors went on to pursue political careers at the provincial level and (to a much more limited extent) at the federal level. Another not unexpected finding was that the threat of electoral defeat means more to the “municipal professional” politician and the “provincial climber” than it did to municipal politicians who had little interest in prolonging their local careers.

Chapter 5 describes what happened to incumbent councillors in Greater Sudbury and London, Ontario in the municipal elections of 2014 after they were strongly criticized in reports from the Ontario Ombudsman for having attended closed, informal council meetings or committee meetings that were illegal. Many did not run again and those who did fared poorly. While these examples demonstrate how negative publicity can dramatically reduce the normal staying power of incumbent councillors, it is also important to note the other observations made by Andrew Sancton, the author of this chapter. As he points out, the Ontario Ombudsman of that time (André Marin) appeared to hold strongly negative views of municipalities as a level of government and the meetings that he attacked as illegal did not appear to fall into that category under provincial legislation. The retirement or defeat of councillors whose conduct was criticized by a provincial oversight officer might seem to suggest local accountability at work. But Sancton concludes that those concerned about accountable municipal government should perhaps reconsider an arrangement whereby high profile but unaccountable provincial officials pass judgment on those elected to local councils.

Chapter 6 offers further perspectives on accountability by addressing two key questions: accountability to whom and of whom. When asked about the most important part of exercising their mandate, amateur councillors emphasized service to their electors, notably taking their issues to the municipal office and supporting resolution of local concerns. In contrast, professional councillors are focused more on their capacity to deliver solutions to problems found in the municipality. They are policy makers whereas the amateur councillors emphasize their individual responsiveness.

Multi-level Governing

Chapter 7 notes the fragmentation of local service production and delivery, with a variety of actors involved in responding to the needs of the residents, and the blurring of accountability that results. Using the example of London, Ontario, it finds that a number of the special purpose bodies operating there are not especially open to the public, providing no information about their meetings (when held and where) and not posting agendas or minutes on their websites. Even so, the chapter concludes that most special purpose bodies in this city provide a public account of their activities and are subject to scrutiny and sanction by local politicians and citizens. In contrast, it found that inter-municipal agreements dealing with service delivery were much more deficient in terms of accountability and transparency. Despite being public documents, none of the agreements were publicly available.

The accountability challenge of special purpose bodies is explored further in Chapter 8 which discusses the operation of Metrolinx, the regional transportation agency charged with leading the coordination, financing, and development of an integrated transportation network for the Greater Golden Horseshoe area. While a majority of the board members of Metrolinx were originally municipal councillors or staff, in 2009 they were excluded from the board and replaced by non-elected provincial appointees.

The chapter offers conflicting views on the merits of this change. We are told that because planning for smart growth calls for concentrating investment in certain areas and favouring certain modes of transportation, a governing board that responds to local pressures might not lead to the most appropriate policy and investment decisions for a region. On the other hand, the chapter notes that a Metrolinx board of unelected provincial appointees makes the agency vulnerable to political interference and that the previous local representation on the board made it more difficult for provincial politicians to keep changing their mind about what was politically better than what was better from a transportation perspective. Ultimately, the chapter concludes that the change in the composition of the Metrolinx board means that it is no longer accountable to, or representative of, local communities, and makes investment choices that are questionable in terms of efficiency.

Chapter 9 explores the challenge of addressing issues involving multiple levels of government by comparing and contrasting the governance models involved in addressing homelessness in Calgary and in Montreal. In the former, efforts to combat homelessness are highly coordinated at the local level but limited financial support from the provincial level has hampered their effectiveness. While the provincial government in Quebec has been much more involved in providing financial support for various social issues, efforts to address homelessness in Montreal have been hampered by the fact that responsibility is fragmented among several organizations.

Overall

As noted at the outset, contributions from multiple authors inevitably means that a variety of opinions—some contradictory—are presented. An introduction and two concluding chapters make a commendable effort to fit the diverse material into an overall framework and to summarize the diverse findings.

A number of unclear sentences suggest that more editing of the text would have helped. To illustrate:

- The second focus of this book concerns the high turnover rate of incumbents, which is often said to account for the “political monopoly” observed at this level of government. (p. 10) Given the reference to a political monopoly and the fact that most of the book notes the staying power of incumbents, I assume that this sentence should have referred to the low turnover rate of incumbents?
- A change in spending before elections was shown to positively correlate with the re-election of the incumbent municipal government. (p. 53) There is no indication of whether we are referring to an increase or a decrease in spending.
- A change in taxes before elections was negatively correlated with the re-election of incumbents.... (p. 53) Here again, there is no indication of whether taxes are going up or down—although the fact that re-election chances were harmed would presumably mean an increase in taxes.
- In Quebec municipalities political parties are virtually absent from the electoral process. (p. 55) Political parties at the local level are most prevalent in Quebec as discussed elsewhere in the book, which makes this statement puzzling.
- The tax rate is measured as a municipality’s share of own-source revenues in the value of its total property value. (p. 61) I have no idea what this statement means. Municipalities have a variety of own-source revenues, varying by province—the most prominent of which is the property tax. The tax rate is essentially a mathematical ratio, a factor that will generate the amount of money needed by the municipality when levied against the total taxable assessment of a municipality.
- It is important that we distinguish between majoritarian government parties where the mayor is the head of the party with a majority. (p. 91) Distinguish between those parties and what?
- Elected at the ward level, they full endorse a vision of themselves as ward healer. (p. 170) No, the term is ward heeler and has traditionally referred to party workers who canvass for votes and perform other tasks in support of a party machine. There is nothing healing about their activities, which have often been somewhat sordid.

In addition, the book contains a number of examples of what a Queen's Professor of mine from more than a half century ago would call "penetrating insights into the obvious." For example:

- The probability of being re-elected is greatly reduced when the performance is considered weak and becomes practically zero when considered poor. (p. 52)
- Incumbent mayors who reduce taxes in an election year are more likely to be re-elected than others. (p. 60)
- A formal coalition presents more clarity than an informal one. (p. 92)
- Average career lengths take a significant plunge in the case of those just recently elected because we can't see into the future. (p. 111, paraphrased)
- When, as in Quebec, elections are held on a neighbourhood basis, elected officials tend to represent one particular community. (p. 166)
- Board members who are appointed by the province tend to align with the agenda pushed by the province. (p. 219)
- Clarity of responsibility ... is weakened when political power is more dispersed. (p. 259)
- It is the tax rate that has a broad impact on municipal elections in Quebec. (p. 270)
- Fragmentation between the different levels of government is likely to raise barriers to implementing effective public policy. (p. 275)

Notwithstanding the shortcomings noted, this book is a welcome addition to the literature on local government, exploring concepts that are at the heart of municipal democracy, exhibiting an impressive amount of research, and pointing the way to areas in need of further study.

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