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Foundations of Governance: Municipal Government in Canada's Provinces

Sancton, Andrew and Young, Robert.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.

544 pp.

ISBN 978-0-8020-9709-5 (bound) and 978-0-8020-9650-0 (pbk.)

The impacts of local governance on land use, democratic processes, economic development, and access to services have only become more visible in recent years as the Canadian population becomes increasingly urban. Andrew Sancton and Robert Young, in this edited volume, present an overview of municipal governments and their oft-politicized relationships with Canada's provincial governments. As experts in local governance issues, Sancton and Young have assembled scholars from each province: each covers essentials on the history and structure of municipal legislation in their province, municipal functions, demography, and municipal finances. The chapters follow a common template to simplify comparisons.

The book presents the complexities of provincial-municipal relationships and municipalities' transition from "creatures of the provinces" to "democratically elected, autonomous, responsible and accountable level[s] of government." (Smith and Stewart, 289) The overall theme is that municipalities have been slowly but surely moving from the former to the latter, although the provinces still retain control and oversight. Some provincial governments seem willing to make the transition and give municipalities more autonomy, while others have been reluctant. Provincial-municipal relationships are subject to shifting tensions related to the political party in power, the downloading of responsibilities to the municipalities, municipal government reform, and the decrease in transfer payments from the provinces.

Power dynamics play a key role in the book: David Siegel, in his chapter on Ontario, admits that municipalities generally dislike the provincial oversight of the Ontario Municipal Board, with a "major irritant" being that the board usually decides in favour of proponents who want a change in the official plan or zoning by-law to undertake new development (Siegel, 40). Belley et al. acknowledge that, with five levels of governance in the Montreal and

Quebec City agglomerations, local governance is “increasingly difficult to understand”; this fragmentation, they argue, has a major effect on how cities handle important issues such as social housing and transportation (Belley et al., 83).

Perhaps the most revealing section of each chapter concerns demography, which solidifies Canada’s reputation as a sparsely-populated country with a declining rural and growing urban population concentrated in a few large cities. The aging of the population is a particular challenge in smaller communities, since older populations “use less of the education system, need different types of recreation facilities, need public transit and expanded and affordable housing options.” (Carter, 232) The lack of representation of some groups in local government is also an issue: in virtually every chapter, authors cite the very low percentage of female and visible minority mayors and councillors in Canadian municipalities. Some authors write extensively about municipal relationships with First Nations and aboriginal governments while others do not: notably, Tom Carter (Manitoba) and Patrick J. Smith and Kennedy Stewart (British Columbia) dwell on these relationships in the most detail.

Despite its political science focus, the book would be useful for urban planning students in Canada: each chapter summarizes the legislation that enables towns and cities to create by-laws and official community plans and identifies the provincial bodies that oversee local and regional planning decisions. In some cases, such as Carter’s chapter on Manitoba, the authors explain planning legislation and frameworks in significant detail, underlining the importance of the Municipal Acts and city Charters in creating comprehensive growth management policies for urban centers. It becomes clear that major differences in municipal responsibilities, such as social services in Ontario and education in Nova Scotia, create much higher expenditures for some municipalities.

The editors have succeeded in compiling a primer in local governance, although in some cases more clarity is needed. The chapter on Quebec municipal governance, for example, presents such a confounding explanation of the multiple and overlapping institutions, acts, and jurisdictions that it is far too opaque to the reader. Some authors managed to summarize their province’s local governance in a mere thirty pages (British Columbia and Prince Edward Island) while others extended to almost seventy (Quebec and Alberta). Overall, however, the editors have presented a complex overview of municipal institutions and provincial-municipal relationships that is fundamental for students and practitioners in political science, geography, urban planning, and economics.

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This paper was prepared for the Canadian Journal of Urban Research.

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