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Jack Masson with Edward C. LeSage Jr. *Alberta's local governments: politics and democracy*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1994. Pp. ix, 603. \$29.95

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These are both very good books of their kind. If we compare them with earlier editions, or with their counterparts of previous decades, it is clear that our understanding of local politics in Canada, and our ability to communicate it to undergraduates, has advanced considerably in the past ten years or so. At the same time, there is much that is important to the study of urban politics that they do not cover, and that tells a less flattering tale about the study of city politics in Canada.

Richly detailed, Masson with LeSage offers a lucid presentation of the "nuts and bolts" of local government. The authors adopt a sensible line of criticism and follow it consistently. They argue for the importance and potential efficacy of local democracy and chastise provincial government for its recurring tendency to take actions that have the effect of weakening local government and undermining its credibility. They take a thoughtful, common-sense approach to the pursuit of their line of argument.

For example, they make the insightful observation that Alberta's urban governments, like others in Canada, are characterized by a blurring of executive and administrative roles that does not reflect the established norms of provincial and federal government and that both creates confusion and undermines leadership. In their discussion of local government re-organization they sensibly argue that there is no one correct way of re-organizing the governance of an expanding urban area, that different local circumstances dictate individually-tailored solutions to the problems of growth. Alberta students of local government are fortunate to have the use of that rarity, a regionally-based, well-written, assiduously-researched examination of local government that places it in a national context.

Masson with LeSage do not make a serious attempt to integrate the new American-based orthodoxy of government which has been most successfully captured in Osborne and Gaebler's *Reinventing government*:¹ the idea that government should "steer, not row", ie secure services, often through competitive bidding, rather than necessarily delivering them itself; the emphasis on serving taxpayers in a way that emulates retail trade, with "citizens" and "clients" becoming "customers"; and the struggle to find ways of eliminating, or at least reducing, bureaucratic complexities. Masson with LeSage mention Osborne and Gaebler several times, but obviously reject the widely-held belief that "re-invention" constitutes a new state of grace. In this regard, Tindal and Tindal offer a more adventurous, and somewhat less consistent, approach to the study of local politics.

Tindal and Tindal has, in the past few years, become the standard text on Canadian local government. Its strong suit, in its early editions, was that it offered a straightforward, well-organized presentation that met with favour among undergraduates struggling to gain purchase on the complexities of local government, but it was not notable for its scholarly authority. In the two most recent editions, it has gained authority as it has amassed a growing cache of supporting literature. It now offers an explanation of the structures of local government, of their historical origins and their strengths and weaknesses, that is amply comprehensive for an undergraduate text, while remaining readable, well-organized and readily understandable, even to a novice.

In addition, Tindal and Tindal offer Canadian students some new food for thought in their attempt, for better or worse, to integrate the "re-invention of government" into their discussion. This venture produces somewhat mixed results. The new orthodoxy does not always sit comfortably with the more traditional remedies for the ills of local government recommended elsewhere in the book. Tindal and Tindal have not recanted their advocacy, in earlier editions of the text, and still in the current one, of local political parties, a strengthened representative function and a wider range of municipal powers, more clearly subject to the authority of city council. It is at least questionable whether such reforms are compatible with a government that eschews bureaucratic complexities and relies heavily on market mechanisms. But despite these contradictions—indeed in part because of them—the text offers a good reflection of the complexities of local government in the 1990s.

What we have here, then, is two books that both offer a high-quality, common-sense discussion of the institutions of local government, and of the politics that surround them. There is no objection to such studies, on the contrary they are essential to an understanding of local politics. But they do constitute the "nuts and bolts", and are not well-calculated to excite students. Both books do this uninspiring but important work well. What they do much less well is expose students to some of the many debates in the urban literature that make the study of urban politics truly exciting.

There is, for example, the long-standing public choice debate, which raises the fundamental question of whether a market model offers a more appropriate approach to local governance than a traditional political model. This theoretical debate has had practical consequences for local governments throughout North America, consequences that are visible in the growing practice of contracting out various municipal services, as well as in the Osborne and Gaebler approach to "re-inventing government". Both Tindal and Tindal and Masson with LeSage refer briefly to public choice theory, but barely hint at the fundamental importance of the debate.²

A very different set of fundamental questions are raised by a Marxist literature about cities that is well-established in Europe, and that might reasonably be used to raise the question of

whether the puzzling resistance of local institutions to truly democratic norms of decision-making — a resistance noted in both texts—might originate in something other than a bumbling inability to understand how a genuinely democratic system of decision-making should work. Tindal and Tindal devote a couple of pages to Marxist theory. In Masson with LeSage, Marx does not make it into the index.

It might be argued that old-line Marxist theory is beginning to wear thin — though without a doubt it is still useful in raising some of the questions that undergraduates should be wrestling with. But there is also the more recent regulation theory, which is grounded in Marxist literature and which is useful in an undergraduate context in introducing students to the fact that cities everywhere are caught up in a vortex of global economic change, change that has very direct consequences for urban politics. Instructors wishing to make their students aware of the global context of city politics must look elsewhere for readings.

And then there is the exciting, fundamental and quintessentially political question of whether we are developing our cities in an intelligent manner—whether, for example, “sprawl” patterns of suburban and exurban development are robbing our inner cities of their urbanity, or indeed killing them. An excellent reading for raising such questions—highly accessible to undergraduates and still fresh as a daisy 35 years after its publication—is Jane Jacobs's *Death and life of great American cities*.³ A good Canadian source is Edmund P. Fowler's *Building cities that work*.⁴ Such books as these do not exaggerate when they present urban development issues as a struggle for the viability of cities, and undergraduates find such material exciting, but the excitement is not reflected in Masson with Lesage or Tindal and Tindal.

These are only samples. Paul Peterson,⁵ Jack Lessinger⁶ and Michael Sorkin⁷—to name only three of a much larger company—all raise issues profoundly relevant to Canadian city politics that are not reflected in these books, indeed are not readily available from any Canadian source. In fact to considerable extent, the preoccupation of these texts with the routine of formal institutions reflects a similar preoccupation in the wider Canadian literature on local politics. As teachers and researchers, we have not done as well as we could in conveying the excitement of the study of city politics to a Canadian audience. The work that remains to be done falls, not just to the authors of these texts, but to the wider community of researchers and teachers of Canadian urban politics.

Notes

1. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing government: how the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector*. New York: Plume, 1993.
2. Andrew Sancton's *Governing Canada's city-regions* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1994) begins to make this discussion accessible to undergraduates.
3. New York: Vintage, 1961.
4. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens, 1992.
5. *City limits*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981.
6. *Penturbia: where real estate will rise after the crash of suburbia*. Bellingham, Wash: Socioeconomics Press, 1993.
7. Sorkin is editor of *Variations on a theme park: the new American city and the end of public space*. New York: Noonday Press, 1992.

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