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James Lightbody and David Walker

Volume 15, Number 3, February 1987

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018021ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018021ar>

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Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Lightbody, J. & Walker, D. (1987). Canadian Municipalities and Conditions of Fiscal Austerity in International Perspective: A Report and Some Observations. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 15(3), 274–278. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018021ar>

Article abstract

In this report, the authors summarize the well-known historic conditions underpinning the current fiscal plight of Canadian municipalities. Within this overall context the austerity strategies employed by local government officials elsewhere in the world become increasingly suggestive for authorities desperately trying to reconcile service demands with fiscal prudence. Some general observations from recent reports to the generation-old Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation project, coupled with preliminary results of the authors' own field research, are advanced.

Canadian Municipalities and Conditions of Fiscal Austerity in International Perspective: A Report and Some Observations

James Lightbody
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David Walker

Résumé/Abstract

Dans ce texte, les auteurs résument les conditions historiques bien connues, bases de la situation fiscale actuelle des municipalités canadiennes. A l'intérieur de ce contexte global, les stratégies d'austérité, utilisées par les fonctionnaires des administrations municipales ailleurs dans le monde, deviennent de plus en plus suggestives pour les administrateurs qui essaient désespérément de concilier les demandes de services avec la prudence fiscale. Les auteurs présentent des observations générales à partir de rapports récents sur l'Austérité fiscale vieille d'une génération et le projet d'Innovation urbaine en relation avec les résultats préliminaires de leurs propres recherches.

In this report, the authors summarize the well-known historic conditions underpinning the current fiscal plight of Canadian municipalities. Within this overall context the austerity strategies employed by local government officials elsewhere in the world become increasingly suggestive for authorities desperately trying to reconcile service demands with fiscal prudence. Some general observations from recent reports to the generation-old Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation project, coupled with preliminary results of the authors' own field research, are advanced.

Even before the Canadian Federation of Mayors and Municipalities released its famous indictment of the fiscal vulnerability of Canadian local governments within the federal system, *Puppets on a Shoestring* (1976), it was becoming widely appreciated that a structural problem with the historic designation of municipalities as the exclusive responsibility of the provinces with no autonomous constitutional authority was at the heart of considerable fiscal stress for the lower tier.¹ No matter how benevolent a particular provincial regime might be at any given point in time, localities (and especially the larger cities, over two dozen of which have larger populations than our smallest province) consistently experience frustration with ubiquitous limitations upon their revenue sources and vexing directives over expenditure responsibilities. And, unlike their 'more responsible' guardians, municipalities have not been permitted the luxury of borrowing to finance operating, or current, expenditures. In

short, Canadian local governance has lived with a degree of austerity since its inception. The fiscal exigencies that are the experience of our municipalities have only recently been re-discovered by the two upper tiers of the Canadian federation. Consequently, it would be wise for Canadian observers to take a comparative look at how well the international *municipal* community has coped with urban service crisis, in the process raising general questions about citizen concerns and public policy responses, perhaps learning in the process.

Coping with politically popular demands for service enhancement when economic circumstances dictate fiscal prudence has naturally been more the situation in certain parts of Canada than in others. Atlantic municipalities, for instance, have been in this boat since the Second World War while it is only in the eighties that the larger prairie cities have had to retrench. So, Canadian municipalities have had recently to employ numerous strategies to reduce the pressure on expenditures including the laying-off of permanent as well as temporary personnel, job reclassifications, wage and salary freezes or roll-backs, privatization of service

delivery to non-union contractors and the implementation of user fees.

Further, several means for providing fiscal transfers without relinquishing program authority have been devised by the various provinces. Most notoriously, from the municipal perspective, are conditional and shared-cost grants which from time-to-time have constituted flash-points in provincial-municipal relations, just as the federal attempt to design a national urban strategy stirred a jurisdictional stew in the 1970s. For an example, it must be appreciated that in 1982 the extent of this velvet glove control meant that in Alberta 40.9 per cent of municipal revenues were *directly* contingent upon compliance with provincial dictates while in Ontario the direction was only slightly less pointed but still 36.9 per cent.² For the Canadian federation the central point remains this: Canadian local governments are in the front lines of service delivery with the least free-standing fiscal artillery. Their capacity to perform well will substantially underpin, or undermine, the legitimacy of the overall structure in the decade ahead.³ How well, then, have our cities performed in a time of fiscal austerity? And, is this the fair question on which to evaluate their administrations?

In their substantial analysis of Canadian municipal finances Bird and Slack come to the most fundamental of conclusions: municipalities, in the delivery of services, are mere agents of their provinces. On average, about one-half of total overall local government revenues are derived from transfer payments. If eventually we come to appreciate that city finance is an integral part of a national system, then we may also be led to their conclusion, even if not accepting their prescriptions without qualification, that, "larger and faster-growing urban communities may well require new forms of governmental structure...."⁴ But, reforming urban public finance in Canada necessarily implies a substantial reform of *provincial* attitudes and policies.

Until relatively recently, Canadian urban researchers, especially in political science, have focused their attentions upon the institutional aspects of municipal management.⁵ Writing about the development of the Canadian city prior to the First World War, John C. Weaver so accurately observes that, "The city was increasingly considered a technical or physical domain rather than a political or social community."⁶ Far too often, and especially in western Canada, the models to be implemented were also too exclusively derived from American experience.⁷ Certainly the havoc wrecked by the depression, and the subsequent pressures of the massive urbanization sparked by the war years, intensified the search to uncover some urban management tools that worked.

The inevitable reaction had developed in Canada by the late 1960s. It was spawned, as Sabetti succinctly notes, by "a growing concern among public officials and city residents about the eroding quality of urban life and the threat of an

'urban crisis' of American proportions."⁸ The catalyst frequently fanning aggressive reaction was the freeway dream of the municipal technicians. New municipal political actors changed not only specific policy outcomes but also the very process of deciding upon those actions.⁹ Consequently, the municipal management of our current era of fiscal restraint and austerity in the 1980s will unfold in a markedly different political context than that previously set for municipal political leaders, a context that we believe is not yet fully appreciated by provincial authorities.

In our legitimate pre-occupation with Canadian problems, we too often overlook the international scale of local government's confrontation with conditions of fiscal austerity. Hence, one of the more important events of the summer of 1985 was the assembly of Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation project teams in Versailles, for this constituted the most recent activity in an ongoing endeavour to focus urban research activities and to place them into an internationally comparative perspective.

With roots dating to 1964, but particularly since the summer of 1982, a group of American social scientists, with Dr. Terry N. Clark of the University of Chicago the project's spearhead, has endeavoured to survey municipal strategies in coping with fiscal stress. The project initially surveyed, employing a standardized methodology, local officials in all United States cities with populations over 25,000 (approximately 1,000) with an eye to their policy responses to conditions of fiscal restraint. This has been built upon established research: one project participant (Pat Larkey), for example, has accumulated a time series of expenditure patterns for up to 40 years for eight cities.¹⁰

Importantly, the project team endeavoured to ascertain local leadership and decision-making patterns, and policy preferences, appreciating that specific innovation activities might prove effective in one context while failing in others. Significantly, the project has attracted researchers employing generally similar methodology in some 25 other countries, including Canada. Many of the participants among the project teams have also, in the older tradition of the social sciences, become directly involved in the application to local circumstances of the international experience.

Thus, the focus of urban social scientists in general, and political scientists in particular, has dramatically shifted over the last generation from the construction of ideal models to the examination and explanation of existing structures performing effectively under contemporary conditions.

Terry Clark has put it this way, "Local governments around the world confront fiscal austerity ... What happens when cities have less to spend? At least some innovate in ways that deserve attention."¹¹ The prescience of this observation was brought home to conference participants for, precisely as they were assembling, on 16 July 1985, the

United Kingdom parliament completed passage of the legislation that terminated the 20 year existence of the second-tier Greater London Council (effective 31 March 1986 with new local elections following in April) and eliminated over 20,000 jobs, some of whose occupants are to be given hiring preference at the borough level through the practice of 'ring-fencing.' Roughly three-quarters of current G.L.C. spending is reverting to borough level with the rest to be assumed by some as yet un-defined number of Quangos, (Quasi-autonomous Non-governmental Organizations) known in North America as 'special purpose districts.'¹²

The European project teams have uncovered the anticipated differences in strategies adopted by local officials. For example, the Dutch group observes that "As 94% of local revenues in The Netherlands come from grants from higher authorities, analyzing relations between local and national participants is a salient concern." But, striking similarities in experience have also become apparent as the fiscal noose tightens. In France, since municipal employees cannot be legally terminated, privatisation is not a practical option. Nonetheless, conservative R.P.R. dominated cities have increasingly attempted market-oriented solutions (such as contracting out water service systems) while Socialist councils tend significantly more toward revenue raising strategies. Our own interviews in London, in July, 1985, at the time of the termination of the Greater London Council, revealed many similar strategies locally (of course within the context of the rates ceilings set by the Thatcher administration) and, in metropolitan terms, a functional decentralization to QUANGO's to maximize service delivery efficiency presumably along the lines of the Lakewood Plan. In Norway, "the left parties have moved toward more market-oriented policies in just this last year," while in Yugoslavia a more fiscally cautious coalition has responded to more conservative citizens' attitudes such that "Parallels to the taxpayers' revolt in the US, and fiscally cautious policies in Western Europe, were ... considerable."¹³ Our series of unstructured interviews with elected and senior appointed urban government officials in Israel (March, 1986) demonstrated to us not only that municipal governance even in perpetual conditions of austere fiscal circumstances yields many similar service delivery strategies but also creates pressure for direct political management. Both Mayors Lahat of Tel Aviv and Kolleck of Jerusalem have moved to create new, personally-focused, political coalitions in order to produce a stable voting majority to permit permanent control of the appointment of deputy mayors and executive committee.

In the United States also, analysis has now gone well beyond the conventional assumption that all decision-makers and situations are "sufficiently alike that they use similar criteria to reach decisions" to find strong correlations between austerity methods adopted and types of cities and styles of political leadership.¹⁴ A basic typology of cities, leaders and austerity strategies reveals four types of political cultures and styles of leadership in contemporary urban America,

each of which establishes specific limitations upon the approaches taken in response to fiscal strain. As Clark quite sensibly concludes, "Future analysts ... [must] be more sensitive to political feasibility by considering specific contexts where different strategies work best."¹⁵

Unquestionably, the American experience will prove most instructive for advanced post-industrial societies. The fiscal constraints upon local governments are as well known to *Urban History Review* readers as are the problems stemming from the fissiparous state of service delivery in metropolitan areas, and need not be re-stated. But, what is also emerging, and beginning to be understood is that metropolitan institutions (both public and private) are involved in a significant cultural transformation as central city decay, even in sunbelt cities, ripples outwards to the suburbs. Dr. Frank Horton, former Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and an urban geographer, now perceives the emergence of a *permanent* urban "under-class" rooted in a changing economic structure in which manufacturing jobs are increasingly replaced by lower-paying positions in the service industries.¹⁶ Fiscally strapped urban institutions effectively disenfranchise those trying to escape the urban underclass by raising fees, reducing support services and heightening standards for admissions to, among other institutions, those in advanced education. Strategies that work best are desperately in demand.

Political and economic pressures have also led Canadian city governments to wrangle with now dysfunctional institutions more frequently over the last two decades than in past as they seek to jettison much of the historic structural baggage. In Toronto, for instance, councillors in 1969 abandoned the board of control structure (in existence since 1896), focusing power within an executive committee drawn from themselves while at the same time, and much to their surprise, unleashing considerable negative citizen reaction to their own preferred re-electoral system.¹⁷ The most significant of Canadian reforms remains the Winnipeg metropolitan consolidation of 1971 that was spurred in large measure by concern for fiscal equity held by the N.D.P. provincial government which "got much of its political strength from the central city, where unification would lower taxes and increase central Winnipeg's ability to pay for services."¹⁸ The most recent successfully completed initiative, and the one that emerges as the most vigorous attempt to respond clearly to conditions of fiscal austerity, is the case of Edmonton. In 1984, following an election campaign in which the issues of municipal public finance and the city's corporate institutions were raised to a level rarely witnessed in Canadian local elections, the city council rejected a commission board structure in existence since its incorporation in 1904 to focus accountability for the first time in this environment within an executive committee of the elected council.¹⁹

Canadian urban research has been preoccupied more with structures and municipal/provincial relations than with any

other particular focus. A most recent assessment of this orientation comes in a review of the field by Professors Plunkett and Graham who do not even mention the question of fiscal austerity as a particular concern of urban researchers or, for that matter, administrators.²⁰ However, it does appear that a series of recent studies both in Edmonton and Winnipeg are bringing these latter questions to the forefront. They will soon be a priority item on the agenda of most local government colloquia as they were with the Urban Studies Conference in Winnipeg in August of 1985.

Indicative of the kinds of work that are being done are three examples that originate in Winnipeg, sponsored in part by the Institute of Urban Studies. This shift in focus is exemplified by sociologist Dan Chekki who has participated in the fiscal austerity project for some years and who has published two major reports through the Institute.²¹ In the first study he delineates the political struggle over scarce urban resources among interest groups in Winnipeg, indicating how the funding sources of interest groups reveal the distribution of preferences of city councillors in dealing with Winnipeg society. As well, he demonstrates the significant relationships among political participation, partisanship and communication in civic elections. Chekki and Toews have set the stage for further investigation of urban decision-making with the conclusion that "Councillors will have to rise above ideological bias and recognize the legitimate interest of more groups than those to which they themselves hold partisan sentiment ... [the evidence] confirms a state of injustice similar to the Winnipeg case throughout North America and for the past 100 years at least."²²

More recently, Chekki has participated in the Winnipeg area study directed by Raymond F. Currie of the University of Manitoba. In this case, a sample has been established for investigating the relationship among the demographic variables and political affiliation, neighbourhood residency and attitudes toward local government. Among the more interesting observations at this point are the fact that a clear majority of respondents are in favour of higher spending on the maintenance of physical infrastructure such as roads, the youngest preferring to spend less on policing for more on roadways. Those who have lived in Winnipeg all their lives indicate preferences for spending at a higher level than those who have recently moved to the city. Finally, those who supported the Progressive Conservative party opt for the lowest level of expenditure and those who supported the N.D.P. the highest.²³ In the words of the television commercial, "The best surprise is no surprise." The generation of preliminary research findings such as these should however provide other urban researchers with a firm comparative data base that leads directly to working hypotheses.

The third illustrative essay of interest derives from economist Derrick Hum. In his recent study, Hum reviews how the city economy of Winnipeg has responded to a sustained period of low growth. While other western Canadian cities

have had to cope with spurts of high growth during their boom and bust cycles, Winnipeg has remained a rather stable city economically. Looking at urban austerity problems from the political perspective, Hum argues that the rate of economic expansion plays a most prominent role: "The lessons of this model suggest that policy concentration on improving the productivity of staple production for export in a post-staple led period merely intensifies the rate of urbanization and exacerbates problems for the urban centres."²⁴ In what is essentially a perennial period of urban austerity the basic question for urban policy makers as set by Hum is "whether *any* policy strategy is possible which might mitigate, or even reverse, the tendency towards stagnation." Winnipeg's civic leaders appear not to have been unduly creative. In short, and in the absence of vigorous provincial support mechanisms, "can anything be done?"²⁵ The answer, from an international perspective, is "yes."

The recently released review of the City of Winnipeg Act established that questions of municipal finance are priority items to be dealt with in the immediate future.²⁶ In its *Final Report*, the City of Winnipeg Review Committee argues that development policies followed from the early fifties into the eighties have left the city in the untenable position of being politically and fiscally unable to renew the infrastructures of older neighbourhoods. Because newer housing developments have, in fact, led to class-based segregation there is not always sufficient/political support for renewal in poorer areas. "The resulting polarization ... is a social phenomenon which represents a new challenge to governments. . . . Replacement of the City's older infrastructure has been allowed to lag behind while its services network have been expanded to encompass the newer areas."²⁷ The *Report's* many recommendations addressing these issues essentially outline a new institutional and fiscal strategy for innovation, including a restructuring of council-executive relations, the development of a broader tax base and a 'better deal' from the province to facilitate a new capital works program. What the response will be in a time of fiscal austerity remains to be seen.

What all the above examples do suggest is that Canadian cities have often been as aggressively innovative as their international counterparts in developing urban strategies to cope with an era of fiscal restraint. For the researcher to be helpful in future will require not only an accurate evaluation of the effectiveness of what has been implemented but also an assessment of the comparative contexts within which change has been accomplished.

So, in conclusion it could be observed that, as an international phenomenon, when conditions of fiscal constraint hit the political fan both elective and bureaucratic leaders necessarily become inventive. What *is* important to recognize is that the successful strategies employed will be shaped by and responsive to local political cultures, and the styles and capacities of indigenous political leadership. "What works where?" is the bottom line.

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NOTES

1. Canadian Federation of Mayors and Municipalities, *Puppets on a Shoestring* (Ottawa: The Federation, 1976). Observers have noted of the report that even though the document "did not purport to be ... an in-depth analysis ... the document [was] a source of displeasure to the other levels of government, particularly the provincial." Lionel D. Feldman and Katherine Graham, *Bargaining for Cities* (Toronto: Butterworth, 1979), 45. The provinces unilaterally decided not to participate in future tri-level conferences in consequence.
2. Canadian Tax Foundation, *Provincial and Municipal Finances, 1983* (Toronto: 1983), 63.
3. Economic Council of Canada, *Western Transition* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1984); "Economic Strategies for Cities," Notes for an address by Dr. Stuart L. Smith, Chairman, Science Council of

- Canada, 25 October 1984; Jane Jacobs, *Cities and the Wealth of Nations: Principles of Economic Life* (New York: Random House, 1984).
4. Richard M. Bird and N. Enid Slack, *Urban Public Finance in Canada* (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983), 118.
5. Filippo Sabetti, "Reflections on Canadian Urban Governance Research," *Comparative Urban Research*, VIII, 2 (1981).
6. John C. Weaver, *Shaping the Canadian City: Essays on Urban Politics and Policy, 1890-1920* (Toronto: The Institute of Public Administration, 1977), 2.
7. So, for instance, the former Mayor of Red Deer, H.H. Gaetz, in his address to the 1909 Union of Alberta Municipalities Convention advanced the Municipal Program of the American National Municipal League as his ideal: "In drafting an Act for Alberta our Legislature could not do better than follow it closely..." As reprinted in Jack K. Masson and James D. Anderson, eds., *Emerging Party Politics in Urban Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), 29.
8. Sabetti, "Reflections," 87.
9. See, for a summary of these changes to city political conditions, D.J.H. Higgins, *Urban Canada: Its Government and Politics* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), 208-213.
10. Terry Nichols Clark, "The Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation Project," in *Research in Urban Policy, Vol. 1*, ed. Terry Nichols Clark (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1985), 357-363.
11. *Ibid.*, 357-358.
12. Department of the Environment, *After the G.L.C.: Local Government Reorganization; Government Policy Explained* (London: 1984), 12 pp.
13. "Newsletter #12" *Fiscal Austerity and Urban Innovation Project* (1 August 1985), 1-6.
14. Terry Nichols Clark, "Choose Austerity Strategies That Work for You," in Clark, *Research in Urban Policy, Vol I*, 71-88.
15. *Ibid.*, 86.
16. "Innovations in Urban Education," *Public Universities in Cities: Challenges and Opportunities in Canada and The United States*, A Conference of Members of the Division of Urban Affairs of the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, Tampa, Florida (March, 1985).
17. Warren Magnusson, "Toronto," in *City Politics in Canada*, ed. Warren Magnusson and Andrew Sancton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 100, 117.
18. Meyer Brownstone and T.J. Plunkett, *Metropolitan Winnipeg: Politics and Reform of Local Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 153.
19. James Lightbody, "Fiscal Austerity and Institutional Innovation in a Western Canadian City," in *Research in Urban Policy, Vol. II*, ed. Terry Nichols Clark (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1986). See also James Lightbody, "The First Hurrah: Edmonton Elects a Mayor, 1983," *Urban History Review* XIII (June 1984): 35-41.
20. T.J. Plunkett and Katherine A. Graham, "Whither Municipal Government?" *Canadian Public Administration* XXV (Winter 1982): 603-618.
21. Dan A. Chekki and Roger T. Toews, *Organized Interest Groups in the Urban Policy Process* (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, Report No. 9, 1985); Dan A. Chekki, *Citizen Attitudes Toward City Services and Taxes* (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, Research and Working Paper No. 13, 1985).
22. *Ibid.*, 63-64.
23. Chekki, *Citizen Attitudes*, 27.
24. Derrick Hum, *Winnipeg's Challenge: Adjustment to Post-Staple-Led Growth* (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, Occasional Paper No. 11, 1985), 11.
25. *Ibid.*, 12. Emphasis added.
26. City of Winnipeg Act Review Committee, *Final Report, 1986* (Winnipeg: Queen's Printer 1986).
27. *Ibid.*, 5.