

"Reform" as a Chaotic Concept: The Case of Toronto

Jon Caulfield

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Article abstract

Contemporary "reformism" in Canadian cities is frequently treated, explicitly or implicitly, as a coherent urban political movement and as a movement that has been oriented to "anti-developmentism." In the case of Toronto neither characterization is accurate: "reform" has been neither a coherent movement nor "anti-development."

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Abstract

Contemporary “reformism” in Canadian cities is frequently treated, explicitly or implicitly, as a coherent urban political movement and as a movement that has been oriented to “anti-developmentism.” In the case of Toronto neither characterization is accurate: “reform” has been neither a coherent movement nor “anti-development.”

Résumé

Le “réformisme” contemporain dans les villes canadiennes est souvent considéré, explicitement ou implicitement, comme un mouvement politique urbain cohérent et opposé au développement. Dans le cas de Toronto, aucun de ces qualificatifs n’est juste : la “réforme” n’a pas été le fait d’un mouvement cohérent ne s’est pas opposée au développement.

John Weaver has demurred from Paul Rutherford’s characterization of turn-of-the-century Canadian urban “reformism” as a movement based on the principle that “city government must be more responsive to the interests of the whole community” — that in the past “too much attention had been paid to particular interests” and in the future “civic leadership must look to the whole electorate.”¹ Weaver argues that, on the contrary, a main thrust of “reform” was “to perpetuate a stratified society based upon traditional patterns of deference and morality.... The claim that reformers felt compelled to regulate the city for the benefit of all is simply not accurate. Instead, “reformism” must be viewed as stemming as much from prejudice, self-interest and a concern for property values as from idealism and vision.”²

A similar difference of views has arisen in reference to more contemporary Canadian urban “reform.” Lydia Burton and David Morley, for example, in a work parallel to Rutherford’s, have characterized “reform” in Toronto in the 1970s as “a new political perspective” oriented “against high rise development and growth, and for neighbourhoods as humane living spaces for residents of all social classes.”³ Andrew Sancton, in contrast, has argued that “the new reformers’, ...overall effect ... was to preserve and enhance the long-term value of existing buildings and land” and “ensure ... Toronto remained an attractive location for real estate investment,” a circumstance in which “the less wealthy were increasingly less able to compete for housing.”⁴ Thus, like Weaver in the case of turn-of-the-century “reform,” Sancton finds that segmental interests have been embedded in contemporary “reformism.”

I concur with Sancton’s sentiment. As the discussion that follows makes clear, I believe the shifts that occurred in Canadian urban politics during the 1970s have not evenly benefited all groups of city-dwellers (“social classes” in Burton and Morley’s usage). On

the other hand, I find Sancton’s view ultimately wrong-headed because, in two key ways, it shares similar misconceptions with the work of Burton and Morley. These disagreements with Sancton, and their implications for our understanding of contemporary “reform,” are the focus of this paper.

My arguments with Sancton are these:

1. Like Burton and Morley, Sancton implicitly treats those whom he labels “the new reformers” as ideologically like-minded; it is assumed that the words “reform,” “reformism,” and “reformer” have systematically meaningful usage — that they denote a coherent concept. In my view “reform” is a “chaotic conception” that “combines the unrelated”⁵; at least in the case of Toronto, contemporary Canadian urban “reform” has been composed of two distinct ideological tendencies. (I hasten to stress that this is not a new view; but, as will become clear, it is apparently a view that needs to be periodically reasserted.)
2. Sancton couches his analysis of “reform” in a theorization that the “main line of cleavage in Canadian municipal politics involves attitudes towards urban development,” of which there are “proponents” and opponents: “virtually all conflict in Canadian urban politics can be located on a pro-development/anti-development spectrum.”⁶ In this context, like Burton and Morley, he locates “the new reformers” on the latter side of the continuum. I do agree with Sancton that “attitudes towards urban development” are the essence of Canadian city politics. But my view is that these politics are too complex to allow the sorting of the participants into groups described as “proponents” and “opponents.” On the contrary, at least in the case of Toronto, “anti-developmentism” is often an analytic red herring; although the groups

that have been lumped under the rubric “reform” have been highly critical of some dominant aspects of post-war city-building, their principal concerns can not be reduced simply to opposing development (more often they have involved that *kind of* development that will occur in the city).

The question of “reform” monologism

Sancton, Burton and Morley are not isolated in their treatment of contemporary Toronto “reformism” as monologic — as a coherent concept. They are only three of a number of authors who have recently taken this tack:

- Richard Harris, for example, whose analysis prominently features Toronto, characterizes “reformers” in Canadian city politics in the 1970s as forming a “fairly neat ... coalition.”⁷
- David Ley, writing partly in direct reference to Toronto, identifies a “reform movement” with “reform values” rooted in a “reform ideology” and supported by “reform aldermen.”⁸
- William Kilbourn discusses “reform” as a single ideological tendency and treats “reformers” as a group with consistent objectives.⁹
- James Lemon describes a “reformers’ victory” in Toronto’s 1972 municipal election that was based in a widespread “reform impulse.”¹⁰
- For James Lorimer, the “citizen group activity” that was the basis of “reform” was rooted in “a collective critique of the corporate city” sustained by local groups from a cross-section of city neighbourhoods ranging from very wealthy to poor.¹¹

It is because this pattern of analysis is so common that it becomes necessary to restate the ideological composition of Toronto

“reform” in the 1970s. A vital clue to this composition was the reaction of John Sewell, city hall’s *enfant terrible*, to the election of Toronto’s first “reform” council on the night of its apparent victory in December 1972. If “reformism” were a coherent movement, Sewell ought to have been delighted; he was not. He was upset by the defeat of two candidates he had supported in downtown working-class wards and was suspicious about what might now be expected from the several successful “reform” candidates from more affluent wards. As well, he was bitter toward the city’s new mayor, David Crombie, a “moderate” whose candidacy he had supported only reluctantly: Sewell had been one of a number of civic opposition politicians who had not wanted to promote a mayoral nominee, preferring to concentrate energy and resources on aldermanic seats; in his mind (not without reason) Crombie’s victory and the defeat of the two inner-city candidates were connected.¹²

Sewell’s election-night scepticism was the first of a series of incidents during the new council’s two-year term that illustrated “reformism” in Toronto city politics was not a coherent phenomenon. Council had been in office less than three months when Sewell lashed out at Crombie for a series of positions the mayor had taken which, for Sewell, clearly *demarked* their politics.¹³ Two months later Dan Heap, an NDP alderman from a downtown ward adjacent to Sewell’s, angrily told council that, though it seemed to be doing a lot for middle-class neighbourhood preservation, not much appeared to be happening to solve the housing problems of low-income households.¹⁴ Before the year was out, Heap was arguing for a regrouping of the municipal opposition along precisely class lines,¹⁵ and by the following year it had become clear, without anyone formally orchestrating such a regrouping, that it had occurred *de facto*.¹⁶ A few months later, in the wake of the 1974 municipal election, the split was made official when Sewell, Heap, and four other aldermen who shared their concerns constituted

themselves as an organized bloc which they styled the Reform Caucus.¹⁷

What was happening has since been analysed by several writers¹⁸ and recognized by others.¹⁹ The fragile “reform” coalition had, in fact, sprung from two distinct sources: on the one hand, from more affluent communities mainly concerned with perceived destructive consequences of post-war city-building practices on the ambiance of the built urban environment; and, on the other, from less affluent communities mainly concerned with ways in which these practices were violently oblivious to their housing needs and traditional living-places. Because some of the general principles of the latter group were consistent with various particular policy initiatives of the former, “the objectives of the middle class (were) served ... neighbourhoods would be protected, the automobile would be treated with common sense and the style of development modified. But these limited objectives were a far cry from those of reformers who saw reform as a means to achieve basic change ... (and) of redistributing wealth and power.”²⁰ Because the politicians who supported basic change were a minority at City Council, their efforts to accomplish a serious reorientation of local government were doomed to fail. These politicians had to be satisfied with occasional situational victories and, between these, with acting as an opposition voice for city-dwellers whom they believed were otherwise largely overlooked by city hall (a role which the successor of the Reform Caucus, council’s NDP Caucus, fitfully continues today). The collision of ideologies between the two “reform” factions drove them into camps that often battled one another as bitterly as they opposed council’s old guard.

It is inaccurate, then, to portray Toronto “reform” as a movement rooted in coherent values and interests. The commitment to social housing associated with “reform” by Ley²¹ and Lemon²² occurred mainly because of the efforts of the councillors and community organizations from working-class

neighbourhoods, without which “it is doubtful that the city would have made subsidized and ‘affordable’ housing important components of its housing program”²³; left to its own, middle-class “reform” would not have made social housing part of its agenda. Kilbourn’s vivid celebration of the redesign of the Eaton Centre as a “reform” victory — the project, he writes, was recast from “a suburban shopping plaza dumped into the heart of the city” to “a cathedral-like galleria” that gave “Toronto’s mercantile heartland ... an attractive focus, with the excitement and elegance that it sorely needed”²⁴ — belies that fact that the Reform Caucus voted solidly against it.²⁵ And Lorimer’s characterization of a Rosedale citizens’ group, led by Conrad Black, as typical of the Toronto community organizations that emerged from “low-income ... to upper-income ... neighbourhoods”²⁶ is simply not plausible: the kinds of issues that arose in downtown communities — like Trefann Court (wholesale demolition for public housing²⁷), South St Jamestown (blockbusting by a rapacious high-rise company²⁸), and South Riverdale (fallout from a local lead smelter²⁹) — are not comparable to the Rosedalers’ worries about half-acre lot sizes. In any case, groups from more and less affluent neighbourhoods have highly differential access to influence at city hall and are required to organize themselves and their strategies accordingly.

The question of “reform” anti-developmentism

It is also inaccurate to characterize the groups that have been labelled “reformist” as “anti-development,” unless all that we mean by this is opposition to whatever kind of development property corporations and the local state happen to be up to at the moment. The notion of “anti-development” then would be so loose as to lack meaning. For example, middle-class “reform” supported the development of such projects as the redesigned Eaton Centre and the prestigious midtown housing-and-retail complex Hazelton Lanes, which Kilbourn

cites as an illustration of innovative mixed-use approaches to downtown city-building that “reformists” encouraged.³⁰ In these and other cases, it was not development as such that roused middle-class “reform” ire but rather the style and pace of development and the absence of any real planning process to guide it. Middle-class “reform,” its numbers steadily swelled by Toronto’s increasing “post-industrial” gentrification, disliked a number of essential features of modernist urban development — particularly its destruction of the historical architectural fabric and its segregation and specialization of land use. Middle-class reformers especially objected when urban development threatened their own traditional or newly white-painted neighbourhoods. They suspected that city hall’s unalloyed boosterism was doing violence to the local public economy — for example, when major new downtown projects were approved with little care for infrastructural costs. They were doubly upset when City Council, on the one hand, avoided any meaningful process of public participation in planning and, on the other, habitually rewrote its own planners’ reports to suit its whims for example, in the case of the Metro Centre.³¹ But, for all that, middle-class “reform” has not been “anti-development.” Together with City Council’s “moderates” and old guard, “reform” politicians have overseen the fashioning of a “new” policy for Toronto’s downtown that has been remarkably *pro*-development: a policy that, except in matters of style, has not really been all that different from the boomtown boosterism it was said to supersede.³² And in the midst of Toronto today, where canons of middle-class “reform” are the new orthodoxy³³ and “urban development as a principle vehicle for capital accumulation proceeds apace,”³⁴ it is hard to know what to make of Lorimer’s 1981 declamation that “the era of the developers ... of rapid urban growth ... is over.”³⁵ Someone apparently forgot to tell the developers.

Nor were community groups and politicians that aligned with the Reform Caucus simply

“anti-development.” They were vigorously hostile to the activities of development corporations and the customary practices of property capital and to the form and management of public housing in the city; but these are not the same thing as “anti-developmentism.” Caucus members consistently supported the construction of non-profit and co-operative housing across the city, developments that ranged from smaller projects like the Hydro Block to the rebuilding for housing of an entire obsolete warehousing district now named St Lawrence. They supported the development of moderate-density infill-housing in a number of neighbourhoods. And they sought — energetically, though mostly without success — to find ways to generate new industrial growth in a climate of accelerating deindustrialization that was diminishing the livelihoods of the city’s working-class communities. This concern dated from the 1973-74 council, when the city planning staff wrote a preliminary report on the issue.³⁶ It reached its peak during the 1979-80 mayoralty of Sewell, who actively sought to maintain and develop the city’s industrial base.³⁷

Neither faction of “reform,” then, is accurately placed at the “anti-development” end of a simple pro-development/anti-development spectrum. Politics in Toronto have been somewhat more complex than this.

Conclusion

In response to Marxian commonplace, Manuel Castells theorizes the occurrence of “urban mobilization(s) ... organized around classless lines ... around issues that only indirectly relate to class power.”³⁸ This is a concept that needs to be applied with some care. For example, among Castells’s key illustrations from the contemporary urban period is the San Francisco gay community.³⁹ There may be, however, salient, class-based differences of values and interest *within* gay communities.⁴⁰ In

these and other instances, incautious use of the notion of “classless” urban political activity may obscure attendant realities. It may be crucial, for example, to distinguish class activity in the analysis of the community politics of ethnic districts like Toronto’s Chinatown, where intra-ethnic class was a key variable in local conflict about neighbourhood planning and development.⁴¹ Still, Castells’s conclusion based on diverse case-studies is persuasive: urban movements cutting across class lines do appear to have been critical actors at various specific moments in urban history. But contemporary Canadian urban “reform” — like the turn-of-the-century Canadian “reform” viewed by Weaver — has not been one of these moments.

There *do* seem to have been particular “reform” concerns in Toronto in which class has not much mattered. “Reformists” of all stripes, for example, have opposed construction of expressways through Toronto’s midtown and east-end districts and development of a non-profit housing project in Toronto’s Donvale neighbourhood in the 1970s was supported by a coalition of middle and working-class local residents (and opposed by gentrifiers and speculators anxious about their property values).⁴² Toronto’s Island community, which has fought for more than two decades for its survival, is a class hodgepodge.⁴³ But the occurrence of discrete “classless” issues, or the presence of a handful of middle-class activists in low-income communities, are peripheral to the central fact that Toronto “reform” emerged from two quite different ideological orientations — orientations based, in Castells’s term, in quite different notions of “urban meaning”⁴⁴ that were clearly inscribed by class.

What is interesting about Toronto “reform,” then, is not that it somehow embodied the conjunction of these two different orientations in a single movement, but rather that it embodied their collision. In assessing the outcome of this collision, Sancton is entirely

accurate: “reform” did serve as a smoke-screen for “a new type of booster(ism)”⁴⁵ — one which (echoing Lithwick) has promoted “a substantial redistribution of resources in favour of the élite,” a redistribution that has “aggravat(ed) the problem of urban inequity.”⁴⁶ This was not, however, a process in which the outnumbered politicians and community groups from less affluent parts of town during the 1970s were in some way participants but rather was a process they were helpless to prevent. And Toronto today is not much like the city they would have preferred to create.

Notes

- 1 Paul Rutherford, “Tomorrow’s metropolis: the urban reform movement in Canada, 1880-1920” in *The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History*, ed. G. A. Stelter and A.F.J. Artibise (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979), 377-78.
- 2 John Weaver, “‘Tomorrow’s metropolis’ revisited: a critical assessment of urban reform in Canada, 1890-1920” in Stelter and Artibise, 394, 408-9.
- 3 Lydia Burton and David Morley, “Neighbourhood survival in Toronto,” *Landscape* 23:3 (1979), 39.
- 4 Andrew Sancton, “Conclusion: Canadian politics in comparative perspective” in *City Politics in Canada*, ed. Warren Magnusson and Andrew Sancton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 294.
- 5 Andrew Sayer, “Explanation in economic geography,” *Progress in Human Geography* 6 (1982), 71.
- 6 Sancton, 295.
- 7 Richard Harris, “A social movement in urban politics: a reinterpretation of urban reform in Canada,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 11:3 (1987), 375.
- 8 David Ley, *Gentrification in Canadian Inner Cities: Patterns, Analysis, Impacts and Policy* (Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1985), 165-66, 171.
- 9 William Kilbourn, *Toronto Remembered: A Celebration of the City* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1984), 326-27.

- 10 James Lemon, *Toronto Since 1918: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1985), 151-52.
- 11 James Lorimer, “Citizens and the corporate development of the contemporary Canadian city,” *Urban History Review* 12:1 (June 1983), 3, 5
- 12 Jon Caulfield, *The Tiny Perfect Mayor: David Crombie and Toronto’s Reform Aldermen* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1974), 2-3.
- 13 J. Caulfield, “City hall,” *Toronto Citizen* 4:6 (1973), 8.
- 14 J. Caulfield, “City hall,” *Toronto Citizen* 4:10 (1973), 7.
- 15 Chris Cobble, “Whatever happened to the citizens’ movement,” *Toronto Citizen* 4:19 (1973), 11.
- 16 J. Caulfield, “City hall,” *Toronto Citizen* 5:10 (1974), 5; J. Caulfield, “Another version of the dream: reform as an empty rhetoric,” *Maclean’s* 87:10 (1974), v-vi.
- 17 Michael Goldrick, “The anatomy of urban reform in Toronto,” *City Magazine* 3 (1978), 37; Warren Magnusson, “Toronto” in Magnusson and Sancton, 122.
- 18 Caulfield (1974); Goldrick, 29-39; Magnusson, 111-27.
- 19 Bill Freeman, “Toronto’s Sewell and urban reform” in *The City and Radical Social Change*, ed. Dimitrios Roussopoulos (Montreal: Black Rose, 1982), 290-91; Frances Frisken, *City Policy-Making in Theory and Practice: The Case of Toronto’s Downtown Plan* (London: University of Western Ontario, 1988), 37; Donald Higgins, *Local and Urban Politics in Canada* (Toronto: Gage, 1986), 246-50.
- 20 Goldrick, 36.
- 21 Ley, 171.
- 22 Lemon, 152.
- 23 Frisken, 98.
- 24 Kilbourn, 322.
- 25 Caulfield (1974), 105, 155.
- 26 Lorimer (1983), 5.
- 27 Graham Fraser, *Fighting Back: Urban Renewal in Trefann Court* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1972).
- 28 John Sewell, *Up Against City Hall* (Toronto: James Lewis and Samuel, 1972), 140-62.

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- ²⁹ Caulfield (1974), 113-24.
- ³⁰ Kilbourn, 329.
- ³¹ Caulfield (1974), 5.
- ³² Frisken, 95.
- ³³ Higgins, 250; James Lorimer, "The post-developer era for Canada's cities begins" in *After the Developers*, ed. James Lorimer and Carolyn MacGregor (Toronto: Lorimer, 1981), 10.
- ³⁴ Goldrick, 38.
- ³⁵ Lorimer (1981), 6.
- ³⁶ City of Toronto Planning Board, *A Place for Industry* (Toronto: City of Toronto Planning Board, 1974).
- ³⁷ John Sewell, "Industrial strategy for City Hall" in Lorimer and MacGregor, 25-29; Frisken, 63; Magnusson, 124.
- ³⁸ Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 68.
- ³⁹ Castells, 138-70.
- ⁴⁰ Lawrence Knopp, "Social theory, social movements and public policy: recent accomplishments of the gay and lesbian movements in Minneapolis, Minnesota," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 11:2 (1987).
- ⁴¹ Richard Thompson, "Ethnicity versus class: an analysis of conflict in a North American Chinese community," *Ethnicity* 6 (1979), 306-26.
- ⁴² Janice Dineen, *The Trouble with Co-ops* (Toronto: Green Tree, 1974).
- ⁴³ Sally Gibson, *More Than An Island* (Toronto: Irwin, 1984).
- ⁴⁴ Castells, 303.
- ⁴⁵ Sancton, 294.
- ⁴⁶ N. H. Lithwick, *Urban Canada: Problems and Prospects* (Ottawa: Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1970), 18.