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A Defence of Urban "Reform"

Richard Harris

In an article recently published in this journal, Jon Caulfield argued that "reform" is an inappropriate label to describe Toronto civic politics in the 1970s.¹ He contends that the so-called reformers in fact represented very different social groups, with middle-class interests differing markedly from those of the working poor and welfare poor. These groups and their representatives came together on some issues, notably in their opposition to the Spadina Expressway. On many other issues, however, they found themselves divided rather than united, and in general the interests of the middle class prevailed.

Caulfield's argument is both controversial and timely. Controversial because the term "reform" has been quite widely used to describe Toronto — and indeed Canadian — municipal politics in the 1960s and 1970s; timely because the publication of Caulfield's article coincided with a Toronto civic election that has been widely heralded in the media as a victory for reform.² Some commentators have recently drawn parallels with the events of the early 1970s.³ The issue as to whether "reform" is a useful label in Toronto therefore has both an academic and a political relevance.

Although I agree with almost everything that Caulfield says about Toronto politics in the 1970s, I do not share his conclusion that "reform" is a chaotic concept that should be discarded. To explain this apparently inconsistent position, it is important to distinguish the late 1960s and early 1970s from the remainder of the 1970s and the 1980s. I have argued elsewhere that what is usually referred to as the urban reform movement in Canadian cities was, during the 1960s, an integral part of a wider movement for social change.⁴ Without this wider movement, and despite the existence of tensions and social problems within cities, there would not have been any coherent pressure for reform at the municipal level. It is true that once local reform movements had developed they often acquired their own momentum. Such, I believe, was the case in

Toronto, where, mainly because of the continuing fight over the Spadina Expressway, it is plausible to talk about a local reform movement as late as 1972. But, in general, urban reform had disintegrated soon after the national movement began to fall apart in the late 1960s.⁵ This fact suggests that "reform" is an appropriate label for the 1960s, and in some cities for the early 1970s, but not for the period since. Caulfield may be right about the 1970s, but his argument is not decisive in disproving the relevance of "reform" to politics in Toronto.

This defence of the concept of reform may seem a little too "cute." After all, there was much continuity between the 1960s and the 1970s. If political activists — and the social interests that they represented — were united in one decade, how could they be divided in the next? The answer, I think, is that neither the unity nor the division was absolute. The reform coalition of the 1960s contained two major elements: the "New Left," and a more diffuse movement for social change. The interests and perspective of these groups differed. But, as I have shown for Kingston, Ont., in the late 1960s, they did work together, both in community-based and in electoral politics.⁶ Although I know less about Toronto than Kingston in this period, I believe that the same was true there.

In Toronto the integration of varied interests into a single reform movement is clearly represented in the person of John Sewell, the city's most celebrated reformer. Caulfield treats Sewell in 1972 as a bona fide spokesman for the working class and the poor.⁷ But, of course, Sewell's background was middle class. If, by 1972, he could make a reasonable claim to speak for the poor it was because he, and others like him, had paid their dues in community and municipal politics in the late 1960s when, for a short period of time, disparate groups made a common reform cause.

In the 1970s Sewell, and other representatives of the disadvantaged, found themselves swimming against the tide of events, as differences from within broke the reform coalition apart. Reform became an increasingly middle-class phenomenon, not only in the sense that it was led by those with middle-class jobs and backgrounds, but also in the sense that it was preoccupied with furthering middle-class interests. There were still contexts, such as the NDP, within which cooperative and reformist politics were carried on. There were still reformers, but no longer a reform movement. Furthermore, as the 1970s wore on, the political edge of even the reformers became blunted. The coalition of the 1960s had fallen apart, leaving only the fragments behind. In that sense a significant political discontinuity separates the late 1960s from the 1970s.

"Reform" has long been a slippery word. In some contexts it is indeed a chaotic concept that hides more than it reveals about what is actually happening. On balance, I think that Caulfield is right to criticize the use of the term to describe civic politics in Toronto — and probably most Canadian cities — during much of the 1970s. The use of the term for that period is, I suspect, just as misleading as it is for the present. The so-called "reform" group that now controls Toronto City Council is dominated by those with affiliations to the NDP. This connection gives the group some unity. But there are, as yet, only weak signs of a truly popular movement for real change within the city, and no signs of a broader movement for social change. Without such a movement it is hard to see how a reform agenda can be carried through. The contrast with the late 1960s is striking. Then there was both a broad and a local movement for change. Those who worked together at that time came from diverse social backgrounds and had their political disagreements. But they agreed on the need for significant social change and they did work together to achieve that end. Applied to that specific period, "reform" still seems to be a useful label.

Notes

- ¹ John Caulfield, "'Reform' as a Chaotic Concept: The Case of Toronto," *Urban History Review*, 17:2 (October 1988), 107-11.
- ² "Eggleton to Face Reform Challenge," *Globe and Mail*, 15 Nov. 1988.
- ³ Tom Hawthorn, "Power Play," *Toronto Life*, 22 November 1987: 118-25, 184, 187.
- ⁴ Richard Harris, "A Social Movement in Urban Politics: A Reinterpretation of Urban Reform in Canada," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 11 (1987), 363-81. Caulfield states that I argued for the existence of a "reform coalition" in the 1970s. In fact, I emphasize that my argument pertains to the late 1960s and not to the 1970s. See pages 364, 376.
- ⁵ In many ways the FLQ crisis of October 1970 signalled the end of "the sixties" in Canada.
- ⁶ See Richard Harris, *Democracy in Kingston: A Social Movement in Urban Politics* (Montreal and Kingston, Ont., 1988).
- ⁷ Caulfield, 108.