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Jack Masson with Edward C. LeSage Jr. *Alberta’s local
governments: politics and democracy.* Edmonton: University of

C. Richard Tindal and Susan Nobes Tindal. *Local government in
Pp. xv, 399.

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 govern-
ment and that both creates confusion and undermines leader-
ship. In their discussion of local government re-organization
they sensibly argue that there is no one correct way of re-organ-
izing 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 govern-
ment 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:*

> “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
deal, 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 adventur-
os, and somewhat less consistent, approach to the the study
of local politics.

Tindal and Tindal has, in the past few years, become the stan-
dard text on Canadian local government. Its strong suit, in its
early editions, was that it offered a straightforward, well-organ-
ized presentation that met with favour among undergraduates
struggling to gain purchase on the complexities of local govern-
ment, 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 expla-
nation of the structures of local government, of their historical
origins and their strengths and weaknesses, that is amply com-
prehensive for an undergraduate text, while remaining read-
able, 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 inte-
grate 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 reme-
dies 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 bureau-
cratic 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 poli-
tics 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 gov-
ernment”. Both Tindal and Tindal and Masson with LeSage refer
briefly to public choice theory, but barely hint at the fundamen-
tal importance of the debate.

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. A good Canadian source is Edmund P. Fowler’s Building cities that work. 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, Jack Lessinger and Michael Sorkin—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
2. Andrew Santon’s Governing Canada’s city-regions (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1994) begins to make this discussion accessible to undergraduates.

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