Canada's Cities: Laboratories For A New Federalism

Friday, March 4, 2005 – Canadian governments must overcome constitutional hang-ups, political rivalries and outmoded fiscal arrangements to collaborate on a new urban agenda. If they don't, Canada will be left behind in a global economy that favours cities that deliver a high quality of life to their citizens.

That's the thrust of a new paper by Neil Bradford, CPRN Research Associate in Cities and Communities and Professor of Political Science at Huron University College at the University of Western Ontario. In ***Place-based Public Policy: Towards a New Urban and Community Agenda for Canada***, Bradford argues that the increasingly complex challenges that govern the quality of life in our cities cannot be solved by one or two players acting on their own. Instead, Canada's future competitiveness depends on its ability to set aside traditional, segmented and aspatial approaches and develop a "place-based public policy" rooted in "collaborative, multilevel governance".

In the new knowledge economy, distance to market may no longer be the important economic factor it once was, but location, paradoxically, is more important than ever. Location in the sense of "place quality", that is.

"Knowledge-based innovation is the critical ingredient for prosperity and well-being in the 21st century," says Bradford. "It thrives in places that value diversity, encourage the flow of new ideas, and include all residents in the economic, social and political life of the community."

This represents a tremendous opportunity for Canada, a country where 80% of its citizens live in urban areas.

Bradford stresses, however, that there is nothing automatic about cities emerging as innovative, inclusive and sustainable places. What is required is a new urban policy framework that recognizes the complexity (or "wickedness") of policy problems, that taps into *local knowledge and resources*, and is characterized by *horizontal collaboration* within cities and communities, and *vertical collaboration* across all levels of government.

Bradford's model weaves together the goals of social equity and inclusion, economic success and political reform.

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“So many of our major social challenges today are located and experienced in urban communities and addressing them effectively is essential to economic competitiveness,” Bradford explains. “Getting there involves reinvigorating the political process. It could turn our cities into laboratories for modern democracy.”

Despite the logic of collaborative approaches to urban policy, Bradford finds little progress towards this objective in Canada. He reviews recent developments in Europe and the United States, where the new collaborative urban paradigm has been applied and draws lessons of relevance to this country.

He suggests three key areas of reform that could provide a greater strategic focus for all three levels of government currently active in urban policy and governance:

- *New principles* of intergovernmental relations to include municipalities.
- *New processes* to bring an “urban spatial lens” to bear on economic, social and environmental policies of governments.
- *New practices* for the delivery of tri-level programming tailored to the specific needs and assets of different cities and communities.

Bradford finds promising examples for future efforts in a number of current initiatives across Canada, like the Urban Development Agreements in Vancouver and Winnipeg, and the Urban Aboriginal Strategy in Regina.

He concludes his paper with a discussion of the key factors that will help move the new urban agenda forward: leadership, social trust and democratic accountability.

“Time is of the essence,” says Bradford. “Other countries have already invested a great deal in new urban governance arrangements. We can learn from them, but we need to build our own body of experience – the intellectual, social and political capital that will deliver a high quality of life and economic success in our own cities.”

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