



Commentary

Coming Together Locally and Nationally

London Free Press “Next London” Submission

Neil Bradford

A strong community supported by smart federal and provincial policies is the key to London’s future

It is an appropriate time for London to be taking stock of its future. One reason of course is the 150th anniversary celebration. But there is a more important reason. It stems from one of the central paradoxes of our time. As economic processes and cultural flows move to the global scale, the significance of the local is not diminished but in fact increased. Where it was once assumed that a world of virtual communications, instantaneous transactions, and hyper mobility would render cities obsolete, demographers now tell us just the opposite. Canada, like many other nations, has become largely a country of cities. Nearly 80 per cent of Canadians live in urban areas, with fully 64 per cent concentrated in the country’s 27 Census Metropolitan Areas (cities with a population of 100,000 or more).

What’s behind the resurgence of the local? Simply put, a growing body of research demonstrates that the quality of urban communities powerfully shapes not only the fortunes of individual residents, but also the overall success of nations. Economists report that cities are the engines of growth for national economies. Yet, census data reveal that in these same cities many vulnerable residents experience the country’s most extreme poverty. Moreover, managing Canada’s cultural diversity has become essentially an urban affair as the vast majority of immigrants settle in our large cities. And environmentalists now identify the greatest threats to sustainability in sprawling city-regions that consume resources and land well beyond the rate of renewal.

The “new localism” carries three essential messages. First, cities are where today’s major public policy issues play out. Second, making progress requires “local knowledge” – the ideas of residents, civic groups, and municipal leaders. Third, strong communities supply the essential foundation for sound national development.

Acting strategically on these messages is now an urgent Canadian challenge. For London, I believe, there are two priorities. The first relates to the local setting, while the second looks upward to the public policy context for urban revitalization in Canada.

To begin locally, London should set its sights on becoming a “strong community”. In a series of recent reports, Canadian Policy Research Networks has identified the characteristics of strong communities. They are places that define a vision of their future and take the steps necessary to get there. They are open to ideas and contributions from all residents and sectors. Strong communities encourage collaboration because they respect the inherent value of diversity. Equally important, they collaborate because they understand the interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental issues and the need for many kinds of “expertise” to refresh the knowledge base and create synergies. Faced with complexity, strong communities do not retreat into the perceived security of the past, nor do they fragment into individual sectors or silos. Working in an integrated way, strong communities continuously strive for the high quality of place that is the mark of urban excellence in the global age.

Of course, making cities strong communities is not easy. But the Next London series has amply demonstrated the local presence of two key ingredients. First, there is a rich vein of innovative ideas and diverse perspectives to draw upon. Contributors have ranged widely across an exciting urban agenda, exploring leading edge issues such as regional economic collaboration, research clusters, healthy cities, and sustainable planning. Second, London is well-served by many volunteers, organizations, and networks working hard on problems of concern to their particular constituencies. These include the London Economic Development Corporation, the London Community Resource Centre, the Urban League, Pillar Voluntary Network, and the Creative Cities Task Force, to name but a few.

What seems to be missing, however, are processes or mechanisms to engage the various interests in a meaningful dialogue that acknowledges legitimate differences but also explores the common ground. London needs a coordinating body or governance mechanism to bring together its many voices and visions. This is a gap in the civic institutional landscape, and experience elsewhere suggests that the municipal government, on its own, cannot fill it. Indeed, much practical knowledge is now available from other Canadian cities about community-driven local governance. London, with its rich inventory of ideas and organizations, is well-positioned to learn more about collaboration across issues and sectors. Compelling examples include:

Community-based Indicators. Numerous cities have multi-year efforts to monitor and report on essential social, environmental, and economic conditions. For example, Calgary’s “Sustainable Calgary” and Toronto’s “Vital Signs” each engage a wide cross-section of people to generate user-friendly, yet authoritative data that provide common reference points for action. For example, “Sustainable Calgary” is measuring the city’s “Sense of Community” and monitoring land use patterns with a “Green Map”.

Inclusive Cities Canada. Five Canadian cities, from Saint John to Vancouver, are involved in a participatory research initiative that uses a social inclusion framework to develop strategies for good urban governance. Civic Panels made up of community and municipal leaders facilitate

local social inclusion “audits” on levels of civic engagement, living conditions, opportunities for human development and community services.

Vibrant Communities. 14 mid-size cities with the support of three national foundations are participating in a cross-Canada effort to develop “best practice” solutions to urban poverty. Multi-sectoral steering groups facilitate a community vision and strategic plan. The steering group must include representation from at least four sectors: business, government, anti-poverty groups, and the voluntary sector. Lessons are shared continuously among the 14 cities.

Toronto City Summit Alliance. This broad coalition of civic leaders from across the Toronto city-region formed to take joint action on future challenges. In 2003 they published a landmark report *Enough Talk: An Action Plan for the Toronto Region* identifying shared priorities. The Alliance now coordinates six projects ranging from immigrant labour market integration to city-wide technology alliances and a “strong neighbourhoods” task force.

Clearly, there is an expanding national network of cities sharing experiences, and knowledge of good governance practices. As London pursues its own community building approach it should engage the kinds of urban learning networks described above.

Beyond the local scene, the second key issue for London is to acknowledge fully the wider public policy context for urban revitalization, and advance the municipal interest on the provincial and federal stages. Canadian cities of whatever size and location – even Toronto – cannot realize their visions on their own. Today’s urban challenges originate in forces well beyond the control of municipalities or community organizations. And Canada’s constitution means that almost all local choices are fundamentally shaped by the fiscal and policy decisions at Queen’s Park and Ottawa. What’s critical is the nature of this extra-local context: does it enable or constrain strong communities?

On this question, there is broad consensus that Canadian urban policy has been heading in the wrong direction. Two decades of federal and provincial service downloading and fiscal cutbacks have left all municipalities struggling to provide an expanding range of “hard and soft” urban infrastructure on a very narrow revenue base. Moreover, Canada’s main inter-governmental policy tables where such crucial decisions are taken do not include municipal representatives.

Meanwhile other countries have been pursuing urban revitalization through interesting combinations of “local autonomy” and “central empowerment”. In the United States and Germany, for example, municipalities typically have access to a broad range of revenue sources and policy tools. In the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, central governments rely more on conditional grants to invest heavily in community services and urban infrastructure. There are advantages and disadvantages to each model – the local autonomy approach may reward the already advantaged cities with negative consequences for equity across municipalities, while the central empowerment approach raises concerns about accountability and distortion of local priorities. Nonetheless, in comparison to Canada’s disjointed efforts, both represent serious national urban strategies.

It is here that the New Deal for Cities offers opportunity. The goal is a national framework for strong communities. An “urban lens” is proposed to coordinate the actions of federal and provincial governments in cities. Properly focused, such a lens recognizes that policy developed in Ottawa or Queen’s Park only succeeds when it is applied effectively in London. Sharing the gas tax is a good start since it promises to transfer revenues to municipalities through a flexible formula that respects both important national policy goals and equally legitimate local choices.

There are also other smaller scale inter-governmental collaborations that offer building blocks for Canada’s New Deal for Cities. For many years, Urban Development Agreements in Vancouver and Winnipeg have joined the three levels of government with the community to plan and implement social development projects. Closer to home, the Ontario Competitive City Regions initiative brings together governments at all levels with civic leaders, educators, the private sector, and the Canadian Urban Institute to link educational assets to local economic development. Thus far, nine mid-size cities from Thunder Bay to Guelph have participated in the process. London should sign-up.

Indeed, as the New Deal debate evolves, Londoners need to make the case for bringing, where appropriate, such inter-governmental partnerships to the challenges and opportunities in their city. And there are intellectual resources on tap. The University of Western Ontario’s Political Science department, for example, now houses a major national research grant on multi-level governance and good public policy for municipalities.

The Next London, then, will be built from the ground-up through the combined efforts of citizens, civic organizations, and governments. But the local efforts must be supported by smart federal and provincial policies. Just as fragmented inter-governmental relations no longer work, London must now become its own strong community. In this spirit, Huron University College and the London Free Press are planning a day of dialogue on the Next London in the fall. The aim is to continue the conversation and to find ways to move forward together.

Neil Bradford teaches Political Science at Huron University College and was the 2004 Cities and Communities Research Fellow at Canadian Policy Research Networks in Ottawa.

June 2005