Political Affairs

The forgotten sibling: Revisiting municipal governance in Canada

August 15, 2023

Craig Mutter (op-ed)

Critical discussion of the municipal level of government in Canada has been highly limited in comparison to the extensive attention given to the federal and provincial levels. This is perhaps to be expected given the existential urgency raised by Quebec nationalist efforts of the late-twentieth century; nonetheless, it is not without consequence.

Despite this missing focus within Canadian political studies, Canada's cities are anything but unremarkable. When compared to peers across the globe, Canada's cities stand out as very different from those of almost all countries that we typically compare ourselves to. Relative to the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and even most of Europe, Canadian cities are distinct in their marked lack of autonomy. They are, as they are often colloquially referred to, "creatures of the provinces."

Traditionally, this is meant primarily in a legal sense, on account of section 92(8) of the Constitution Act, 1867, which gives provincial legislatures control over "Municipal Institutions in the Province." Indeed, while many were taken aback by Ontario premier Doug Ford's decision to cut half of Toronto's city council seats in the fall of 2018, this dynamic is emblematic of business-as-usual when it comes to provincial-municipal relations.

The issue goes further than constitutional division of powers, extending along political and fiscal dimensions as well. Recent work, such as that of Smith and Spicer (2018), shows quite clearly that, by all three metrics, Canadian cities are often a highly limited level of government. They have a tightly circumscribed ability to legislate and a limited financial capacity to accomplish goals, even when the division of powers does allow for some independence.

The reason that all of this matters is that Canadian cities' status as relatively weak and contingent institutions has real consequences on our ability to effectively deal with the challenges of the modern world. In some cases, this means municipalities lack the agency to enact or undertake projects in the first place. In other cases, longer-term public works projects see greatly increased risks because potential regime changes occur on not only one but two levels. This compromises long-

term development capacity and incentivizes a focus on less efficient but more achievable short-term actions.

While other levels of government may run deficits in times of financial stress, cities are not legally allowed to do so. Coupled with belt-tightening from other levels, this makes it that municipalities can also end up being the hardest hit by economic hardship. Unwanted amalgamations, inconsistent transfers, additional vetoes, and more all hamper Canadian cities in their efforts to stay relevant, sustainable, and globally competitive.

The concerns are not limited to large cities, either. For rural municipalities, the centralization of power at higher levels is also harmful. While urban residents may, at times, have their concerns answered by provincial governments, rural residents face even greater odds against having their concerns met. Current electoral maps in most of Canada's provinces allow a government to win a majority primarily through appeal to cities. In Ontario, for example, even just appealing to the Greater Toronto Area can result in a plurality of seats. As demographic change sees more and more concentration in "supercities," rural residents may continue to see their own needs and concerns relegated to the periphery of provincial political agendas. With little local power, options are limited.

All of this is to make two cases. The first, simply, is that Canada as a country needs to rethink the way its powers are allocated across levels of government. The Canadian system may have worked historically, but it is increasingly antiquated in the modern day. Giving cities legal powers and autonomy is critical, and these powers must also be coupled with tools to allow for greater financial independence. Municipalities, from Toronto to small rural towns, need self-determination as we move forward. This is a wishful proposition at best, as provincial governments will no doubt be loath to give up power, but it is worth advocating for, at the least.

The second case, perhaps more reasonable, is this: Canadian policy advocates and political scientists need to cease with the perpetual fixation on federal-provincial relations and work to ensure that efforts include all three sets of actors. This choice of greater understanding is the foundation that we need to build in order to start having good conversations like this one – conversations about how we want to live as we move forward.