

Comments by Dr. Patricia Petersen,  
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The following are some thoughts that occurred to me as I was reading the reports on *Lobbying* and *Municipal Governance* that were prepared for the Commission. I hope they may be relevant to the Commission's deliberations.

One of the main purpose of government in a democracy is to allow its citizens to define themselves as a community - through participation, education, and representation. "Public policy is about communities trying to achieve something as communities...Much of politics [therefore] is an effort to define needs collectively."<sup>1</sup> Governments are not just stores from which we as individuals purchase services. Even municipal government, which some classify as an administrative agency of the provincial government because it is so tightly tied to the province's apron strings, is still a government in this broader sense. In that case, theories that apply to business management will not always apply to municipal government. For example, many of the broader goals that need to be articulated by a local council do not lend themselves to the kinds of strategic planning and cost-benefit analysis as, for example, a goal Toyota may have to produce a reasonably priced SUV. The development of civic responsibility in its citizenry is as important a local government function, if not more important, than plowing the streets or picking the garbage.

The changes over the past forty years in demographics in Toronto, as defined by its present boundaries, has dramatically altered municipal government in the city. Common assumptions about municipal government, however, derive from an older concept that views local government as non-political, as public administration. When Toronto was small and fairly homogeneous, it was possible to imagine that local government was just about providing services. The more business-like it was, therefore, the better it performed. Toronto's large and diverse population of today has interests and goals that are rooted in divergent and often conflicting values. Sometimes it is only through politics with its fractious debates and disagreements that these interests can be articulated and met. Politics is essential in governing the city, now more than ever.

It is important to understand how the various parts of the municipal system relate to each other. Even though the Commission's terms of reference do not allow it to comment on the other parts of the system, these have to be taken into account in any of its deliberations. Changes to one part may have unforeseen and unwished for consequences or may not achieve the desired goal because of other constraints within the system. For example, the reports cite the need for politicians to take a city-wide view on most issues, yet the ward-based electoral system forces the councillors to think and act locally most of the time. The constituents primarily view their councillor as their ombudsman in local matters. She gets re-elected or defeated depending on how well she performs this function. This is an important role for the municipal councillor – and for the constituent.

Changes to government structure shift power from one group to another. This shift is not always apparent in the rhetoric used to justify the change. The American historian, Samuel B. Hayes discovered that many of the models of government designed by the reformers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (models discussed in the commission's Governance report) were undemocratic because they centralized power in the hands of the upper middle class and professional city officials. The reformers maintained, however, that their reforms served the public good. Yet Hayes found that the real intent of the reformers was to shut out the working and lower middle classes from government. We have to be careful that any structural changes that are recommended do not reduce the ability of all Torontonians to influence their government.

Two examples from the number of structural changes the reports examine, reducing the size of council and a directly elected executive committee, appear to me to be both undemocratic and dysfunctional. Why? In the first instance, both would give more power to the middle and upper middle class voter in the city because they would enlarge the territory the elected official represents. Reducing the size of council would mean enlarging the size of the present wards. A directly elected executive committee might be elected at-large like the mayor (as were the controllers on Toronto's former Board of Control) or perhaps from wards each covering ¼ of the city<sup>2</sup>. Enlarging the

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox*

<sup>2</sup> That is, assuming an executive with four members plus the mayor.

area of representation would dilute the voice of those segments of society - working classes and immigrant groups - where voter turnout is low. The cost to run for council would increase with an increase in the size of the ward. The cost to run for the executive committee would limit serious candidates to those who are rich or who have who access to those who are rich. The ballot would be long and confusing. Over 40 ran this year for mayor – imagine adding another 40 – or 40 x 4 – for Board of Control. Finally, having a directly elected executive committee increases friction in government unnecessarily. This was the case in Toronto when it had a Board of Control<sup>3</sup>. Each member of the executive – the mayor and the four controllers – speak for the same constituency. The city would have five mayors instead of one. Efficiency, as we all know, is itself not a goal; rather, it describes a preferred way of getting to that goal. One could argue, therefore, that a large and noisy council that represents, recognizes, and respects the many and diverse interests in this community may be the most efficient way to provide for democratic government in Toronto.

Boundaries in politics are impossible to define with any clarity. The history of the reform movement in the United States is a history of failed attempts to achieve a clear separation between administration and politics. It is better to recognize the interconnectedness of the two and design guidelines to reduce unprofessional and unethical behaviour. City officials and politicians need some flexibility to respond to unforeseen events. They need to be able to speak freely with each other. Continued dialogue between politician, constituent and city official creates a deeper understanding of the issues and produces policies that work. We should not make changes that stifle this dialogue.

I had wanted to call these notes “Lost in Transition”, (with apologies to Sofia Coppola) because it seemed to me to describe clearly Toronto’s present situation. The city is coping with three major transitions – the change in demographics already mentioned, the amalgamation, and the “re-alignment”, as the province calls it, of local services. Those who initiated these transitions were unaware of the dramatic effects

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<sup>3</sup> For a history of the Board of Control, see Patricia Petersen, *The Evolution of the Executive in City of Toronto Government*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1985. If anyone cares to see an actual example of how dysfunctional an elected executive committee can be I recommend their watching *Flowers on a One Way Street*, a film produced by the National Film Board in 1967. One half of the film shows a meeting of

these would have on the city and its government. It speaks volumes therefore, of the professionalism and skill of most of our politicians and city officials that the city has managed so well. Most people are unaware of of the successes they have achieved since amalgamation. This is unfortunate.

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Toronto's last Board of Control. The Board was so embarrassed by the film that it had the NFB remove the film from circulation – until I discovered it almost 20 years later in a Montreal warehouse.