Strong Government, Weak Government: Classifying Municipal Structural Change

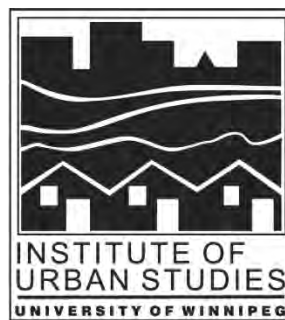**Research and Working Paper No. 23**

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by Christopher Leo
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The Institute of Urban Studies

STRONG GOVERNMENT, WEAK GOVERNMENT: CLASSIFYING MUNICIPAL STRUCTURAL CHANGE
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PREFACE

The University of Winnipeg was the location of a major national urban studies conference, hosted by the Institute of Urban Studies in August 1985. The "Canadian Urban Studies Conference" addressed the general theme of "The Canadian Urban Experience - Past and Present." More than ninety specialists spoke during forty separate sessions on such topics as housing and the built environment, economic and community development, planning and urban form, women and the urban environment, and urban government and politics.

This publication is a result of the Canadian Urban Studies Conference. The Institute of Urban Studies is publishing many of the papers presented at the conference in the Institute's publication series. Some of the papers will also appear in the scholarly journal, the Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine and in book form.

This conference represented a major effort on the part of the Institute of Urban studies in terms of fulfilling its role as a national centre of excellence in the urban studies and housing fields.

Alan F.J. Artibise
Director

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The starting point for this paper is a study of the politics of downtown revitalization schemes in Canada, a study which is intended, on the one hand, to consider the policy and planning issues involved in such schemes, and, on the other, to ask how they are affecting the character of municipal government. When I began the study, the hypothesis was that municipal governments, already seriously weakened by earlier events, were being further weakened by the senior government intervention which goes with downtown revitalization. In pursuing the study, I have begun to question that hypothesis as examination indicates at least some case can be made for the suggestion that municipal governments are more active, indeed innovative, in downtown revitalization than they were earlier--for example in expressway disputes(1)--and that downtown revitalization could prove to be a stimulant of municipal revitalization.

However, there is a prior problem. The strength and weakness of municipal government cannot be debated in the absence of a theory about what constitutes strength and weakness. We do not have such a theory. Indeed, good theories of any kind about Canadian municipal institutions--or those of other countries--are in short supply. Instead, there are a jumble of half-theories, about responsible government, responsive government, public access and public choice. Each of these are enlightening in themselves, but we have yet to have a dialogue about how they relate to each other, what the advantages of each are and what the tradeoffs are among them. These shortcomings lead to another embarrassment: though university teachers and researchers of urban politics come as close as anyone to being in municipal affairs, we find it difficult to produce useful advice. Each municipal reform has its own theory, usually half articulated, or not articulated at all. There is no serious literature which tries to make these theories explicit, relate them to each other and test them.

The attempt to develop a theory which deals meaningfully with urban institutional and policy questions, while relating them to each other, takes

us beyond the existing literature and poses some interesting challenges. The project builds on the provocative questions raised by John Dearlove in that it underlines his repeated charge that much of the municipal literature is lacking in seriousness, being built on wishful thinking and resistance to change instead of theory and fact.(2) His book offered some wonderfully clear and trenchant criticisms of the literature of municipal political and management reorganization, as well as a thought-provoking discussion of the factors which need to be considered in the development of more adequate analyses. But that was seven years ago, and his book will remain a curiosity if it does not inspire the development of a more critical literature of municipal reorganization. The attempt in these pages to define what constitutes weak and strong municipal government, and to indicate the structural requisites for each, constitutes a critical analysis of municipal structures. It is intended in part to help us produce better studies of municipal reorganization.

Thus, this study is compatible with the foundations laid by Dearlove, but it is bound to encounter resistance elsewhere, for in some quarters, the study of municipal organization is treated as some kind of relic from the discredited past, which we have thankfully left behind. Paul Peterson, for example, curtly dismisses such studies on the first page of the preface of one of his books(3) with the following words: "...After World War II the study of local government was able to transcend its traditional concern with administrative efficiency and structural reforms and consider questions of central concern...." In the American academic world, structural reforms may be out of fashion, but in the municipal world of Canada, England and the United States, as well as elsewhere, the search for appropriate institutions remains a very real problem, and one which academics, with their perpetually unresolved disputes over untested theories are doing little or nothing to help solve. In this paper a theory is developed which will be more useful than our existing ones in the design of municipal institutions. It is helpful to begin by taking stock of the municipal theories already available. Thus we begin by looking at three which have been influential in Canada. A brief discussion will serve to underline Dearlove's contention that, like so much of the

municipal literature, they leave much to be desired.

2.0 THEORIES ABOUT MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

2.1 Responsible Government

Perhaps the most influential and controversial theory about Canadian municipal government in recent years has been the idea, associated especially with the names of Meyer Brownstone and Allan O'Brien, that the parliamentary or responsible government model is the most appropriate way of achieving strong, social-democratically oriented municipal government in larger urban areas.(4) But the theory behind this idea has not been worked out, and the question of how it can be tested has not been addressed at all. One result is that we do not know what we actually mean by responsible government at the municipal level. For example, how does one deal with the fact that a quasi-prime ministerial role for the Mayor makes her or him unavailable to represent a constituency? It has been argued that this is a more important problem at the municipal level than it is at senior levels, because municipal politicians have a more important role in dealing with the minutiae of their constituents' day-to-day problems. There is, it is argued, more likely to be a conflict of interest between a Mayor's city wide concern and those of the citizens of a ward he/she represents than would be the case with a Premier's or Prime Minister's Head-of-Government and constituency duties. And what about the government standing or falling on the confidence of the legislature? Both the Unicity White Paper and the Taraska Report ignored this feature of responsible government, even though it is central, not only to the Canadian system of government, but also to other parliamentary party systems. If it is important to include other responsible government features in municipal government, then why not this one? And if it is included, who will assume the role of the Monarch when a government falls? These and other questions have not been answered because we have not fully worked out a theory of responsible government at the municipal level.

It might well be argued that these are questions of detail, which could be

worked out easily enough. A more difficult problem grows out of the failure to address the question of how the validity of the claims on behalf of responsible government can be tested. A good way of posing this problem is by asking the following question: what evidence would be sufficient to prove that municipal parliamentary government has failed? Winnipeg Unicity is the closest thing in Canadian cities to parliamentary government and most commentators are disenchanted with it. It is argued that Winnipeg's government is not noticeably more responsive or more activist in tackling major policy issues than other municipal governments. Defenders of Unicity point to the fact that the scheme lacks some of the recommended "Parliamentary" institutions, but it is difficult to get around the fact that several of the recommended reforms have been implemented, apparently without producing any noticeable improvements. Does that mean, then, that the theory was wrong? If not, why not, and how will we know it if the responsible government theory ever does fail? These are crucially important questions. If we do not have answers to them, or at least a method for answering them, how can we offer advice about municipal government? We return to this question later.

2.2 Local Autonomy vs. Centralization

A different, but related, body of theory is the debate over the character of local government, which has been a staple of university classes in Canadian municipal politics.(5) In this debate, George Langrod contends--with Leo Moulin offering some qualified support--that genuine democracy is possible only at the senior levels of government, because democracy "is by definition an egalitarian, majority and unitarian system."(6) Their concept of democracy, which is clearly in the social-democratic tradition, is opposed by Keith Panter-Brick, who argues for what he calls a "liberal"--as opposed to "egalitarian"--perspective.(7) In effect, both sides in this debate disagree with the Brownstone/O'Brien position that neither sees a chance for strong, social-democratic government at the local level. Panter-Brick, who advocates a substantial role for local government, obviously does so in part because he sees relative local autonomy as an antidote to interventionist government in the social-democratic manner. Langrod wished to limit the scope of local

government precisely because of his desire to promote that type of government.

The trouble with these articles, suggestive as they are, is two-fold: they deal in pronouncements which are neither verifiable nor falsifiable and they operate on a very general level. Both lines of argument seem plausible enough and their plausibility is heightened by the fact that they seem to agree on a central proposition, namely that local government is incompatible with egalitarian democracy. They disagree only on the question of whether local government is a good thing. But neither side shows much concern with explaining what their ideas mean in detail or with testing their validity. Specifically, what institutional arrangements are Panter-Brick or Langrod advocating? What degree of autonomy does the former favour, what degree of centralization does the latter consider desireable? How will we know the governments which they respectively advocate when we see them? What historical or current cases can we investigate in an attempt to determine the validity of their pronouncements? What would they accept as sufficient evidence to prove them wrong? They do not offer us much help in addressing these questions. They offer <u>ex cathedera</u> pronouncements on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

2.3 <u>Public Choice</u>

Another school of thought with relevance to Canadian municipal politics poses a different problem. Public choice theorists have done a good job of clearly specifying at least some of the municipal institutions they favour, and they have shown a laudable concern with finding ways of testing their ideas. In their advocacy of government which is as limited as possible, and which is characterized by fragmentation and duplication of services in order to imitate competitive market conditions, they pose a radical, clear and challenging alternative to social-democratic ideas, both of the Langrod/Moulin and of the Brownstone/O'Brien variety. Our problem with this theory is not clarifying it, or elaborating it, but deciding what to do with it. Those of us who are not prepared to accept it holus-bolus have to decide how we can argue the case against it or, alternatively, which elements of it we can accept and integrate into our way of thinking. Most Canadian commentators on municipal affairs--like many American municipal traditionalists--have dealt

with the public choice challenge by ignoring it and hoping it will go away.

In the meantime, the thrust toward strong municipal government which has been spearheaded by Brownstone, O'Brien and others shows signs of dissipating. At the same time, municipal governments are starting to contract out more of their work while provincial governments begin to take a more beneficent attitude toward private schools—developments which suggest a growing acceptance of public choice ideas. If advocates of strong government are not careful, public choice will have transformed their world before they even get around to formulating their position clearly.

2.4 Toward a Theory

In the remainder of this paper, we look at some proposals for a theory about municipal institutions which is testable and which will help us to understand the alternatives available to us and to choose among them. In order to keep the task to manageable proportions, the paper focuses on the question of strength and weakness: how can we distinguish between strong and weak municipal governments? What factors must we consider in choosing between them? How strong or weak are our current municipal governments and how did they get that way? What are the possibilities for the future? My bias is in favour of strong, interventionist government, and I would prefer municipal governments more autonomous than the ones we have. However, although my bias unavoidably influences the questions I ask and answers I find plausible, my objective is not to find arguments in support of my opinions, but rather to find out whether my opinions, as well as other people's, can be confirmed or proven wrong and how they must be modified if they are to stand on firmer ground. I am hoping that this paper—with the help of the reactions they stimulate, and the modifications which are made in response to those reactions—will make a contribution toward putting the kind of work Brownstone and O'Brien have done on a more scientific basis, and will move us a little bit away from the kind of purely subjective opinion-slinging we find in the articles of Langrod, Panter-Brick and Moulin.

3.0 MUNICIPAL STRENGTH, MUNICIPAL WEAKNESS

Both Weberian and Marxian thought--as well as the empirical orientation characteristic of American political science--have influenced the material being presented here. It is useful to begin this section with a brief sketch of Weber's notion of the ideal type,(8) which offers an approach to the classification of strong and weak forms of municipal government. An ideal type includes both ideas and modes of action which are assembled out of empirical data, but put together in such a way that each type represents a quintessential state of affairs, an extreme version of reality. For example, two of Weber's important ideal types are traditional authority and legal authority, the first of which characterizes patriarchial and patrimonial societies, while the second characterizes modern bureaucratic societies. Neither of these types is likely to be found in its pure state. The value of them is that they offer points of reference which can be used for purposes of classification. We can imagine a scale, at one extreme of which is a quintessential traditional society and at the other a purely bureaucratic one. The actual societies can then be classified according to the degree to which they approximate one or the other ideal type, and a comparison of them can be used to plot trends and to show what happens as a trend proceeds. Weber used these concepts to trace the path of social change on a very broad historical canvas. I propose to use the same notion on a much more modest scale to plot the trends toward weak and strong forms of government which are observable over the past century of Canadian municipal history and to ask where we are now and where we could be headed. We begin with definitions, descriptions and brief discussions of one strong-government and two weak-government ideal types. The concepts out of which these ideal types are constructed are not news to students of municipal government. The contribution this paper makes is an attempt to organize them more rigorously, so that they can be used in scientific investigation. (See appendix for a tabular summary of the ideal types).

3.1 Strong Government

Strong local government maybe defined as a government capable of acting to

reflect the views of its constituents on major issues and to bring about changes mandated by the constituents. Several things need to be noted about this definition. The ideology it reflects is a broadly <u>social democratic</u> view of <u>pluralist politics</u> within the <u>responsible government</u> tradition. Its starting-point is a fundamentally optimistic view of government, an assumption that a government is capable of worthwhile achievements. Accordingly, it holds—here the British responsible government tradition become apparent—that an effective government has to have the power to act. It accepts the pluralist/democratic assumption that such power should be wielded in pursuit of a popular mandate. Its social democratic elements are visible in the idea that government power is reflected in making changes, getting things done, intervening in the society or the economy.

The reader may ask—as critics of earlier drafts of this paper have—why the elements of the ideal-type are assembled as they are, and not in some other way. Why, for example, is there an association between responsible government and social democracy? Is there not as good a case to be made for disassociating the two as for associating them? Responsible government, after all, is a hoary British tradition whose origins have nothing at all to do with social democracy. My answer to this line of questioning comes in two parts. In the first place, the ideal types are not ideal in the sense of "valid for all time," but in the Weberian sense of representing a summary of a wide range of empirical observable phenomena. The empirical referent for this paper is Canadian urban history of the past century. In that period, it is quite clear, that opposition to social democratic trends in urban politics has generally been associated with opposition to strong-government institutions. In future, things may change, just as Weber's legal traditional dichotomy may not be valid for all time. Later in the paper, possible realignments in the foreseeable future are suggested involving a partial reconciliation of social-democratic and public choice ideas.

The second part of my answer suggests a significance for the typology set out in this paper which extends beyond Canadian municipal history: although responsible government in its time-honoured British sense has no association with social democracy, one can argue that responsible government was

transformed by Britain's entry into the age of mass democracy. If for example, modern Britain is compared to modern America, a case can be made that responsible government has a stronger association with social democracy than America's institutions.

In practical terms, then, strong municipal government institutions are composed of elements derived from the British responsible government model: single-member constituencies, representation by population, a large council, a party system, a mayor or other political executive responsible to council, and a set of arrangements, analogous to cabinet, which allow council to supervise the administration and exercise control over it. Strong government advocates also favour metropolitan amalgamation. The most rigorous Canadian attempt to turn this model into a reality began with the Manitoba Government's 1970 White Paper on Unicity,(9) which was implemented in part. The 1976 Taraska Committee Report(10) was another foray in pursuit of the same objectives. A British attempt along similar lines was the Maud Committee Report.(11) Recent reforms in Edmonton, although less rigorously attuned to the British model, are also oriented toward the establishment of strong municipal government in the sense of the definition proposed here. The moves in various Canadian cities to substitute ward systems for at-large electoral systems (as well as Edmonton's more cautious move from an at-large system to multi-member wards) are more modest attempts to apply what I am calling strong-government principles, because they involve attempts to make council more directly responsive to the electorate and thereby increase its legitimacy and authority. Similarly, the longer-term trend, visible in most cities, toward the assertion of council authority over separate boards, commissions and authorities is a strong-government trend.

3.2 Weak Government

In order to characterize the ideological and social basis of weak government we leave the British tradition and turn to the American one, where government, far from being seen as a friend capable of doing good if empowered to do so, is seen as a necessary evil, a potential tyrant to be feared and carefully controlled. Weak government shares the liberal/pluralist tradition with strong government, but rejects the notion of political control—over the

administration, the economy or the society--in favour of that of <u>controlling</u> <u>politicians</u>. The notion that a strong government can achieve worthwhile ends is rejected as idealistic. Government is required to perform certain functions which cannot be performed privately, but its power must be strictly limited. Politicians are seen less as representatives than as potential demagogues whose power must be limited. That government is best which governs least.

In concrete institutional terms, weak government takes two forms: a moderate one, based on longstanding tradition, which we can call separation of powers and a newer, radical one--the true embodiment of weak government principles--called public choice. Under separation of powers--as we find it at the municipal level--the American aversion to strong government has manifested itself primarily in suspicion of the power of elected representatives, who are deemed (not without justification, at least in the past) to be prone to corruption and mismanagement. Their position has been weakened by limiting the size of council, keeping it non-partisan, giving some of its powers to semi-independent boards and commissions, providing for council to be elected at large and, of course, maintaining a separation of powers between the mayor and council. These arrangements have the effect of limiting the power of councillors 1) to organize a broad popular base of support, 2) to organize themselves so that they can control council and 3) to establish control over the administration of municipal affairs. A strong government advocate would see these limitations as a restriction on the ability of politicians to represent the public in an effective manner. A weak government advocate sees them as safeguards against politicians' predictable penchant for manipulating the masses and dominating public affairs.

The suspicion of ward- and party-based political power which is evident in separation-of-powers principles is not matched, however, by a similarly severe attitude toward mayoral and administrative power. Thus we often find that the same people who advocate small councils want them to play a minimal board-of-directors role, and oppose party politics, also support strong-mayor arrangements, strengthened administration, and metropolitan or regional government schemes. The support of strong mayors is justified by the argument

that the conduct of municipal affairs requires competent leadership. Powerful bureaucracies are rationalized with the contention that municipal affairs are a matter of routine administration and that administrative power will therefore enhance efficiency and effectiveness without raising the question of excessive political power.

To a true believer in weak government, this is pretty thin soup. From a rigourous weak-government perspective—a public choice point of view—separation-of-powers arrangements are at best a mealy-mouthed compromise with strong-government principles, as well as a rationalization for arrangements which limit real decision-making power to a small elite. Thus Bish and Ostrom refer with an almost palpable sneer to municipal government arrangements "...in which the focus is on strengthening the authority of knowledgeable, benevolent leaders to determine all subordinate interests."(12) With an iconoclastic flourish, they counter municipal conventional wisdom about the evils of fragmentation and duplication with the following statement: "If ample fragmentation of authority and overlapping jurisdictions exist, sufficient competition may be engendered to stimulate a more responsive and efficient public economy in metropolitan areas."(13) As the quote implies, public choice sees municipal functions primarily as service provision and advocates market-like competition among jurisdictions as a way of securing efficient and effective delivery of services. The institutional means to that end offers an alternative to strong government which is more radical, hence more clearcut, than separation of powers. Public choice advocates oppose municipal amalgamation, party politics and all forms of centralized power. They argue that government should consist of a multiplicity of fragmented jurisdictions which overlap and compete with each other and which, in addition, are subject, wherever possible, to competition from the private sector. In theory at least, public choice is the most consistent, thoroughgoing manifestation of the American ideal of a government tamed and held in check, a government which governs as little as possible.

3.3 Evaluation and Application

If the framework sketched above is worth anything, we will know it by the fact that it helps us to organize and clarify our thinking, ultimately to

understand municipal government better, and to be more effective in charting paths of adaptation and change for it. I have found that it is helpful, indeed I developed and refined it in self-defense against the welter of apparently unrelated information which it is my duty to present each year in what students generally regard as the most boring part of my introductory city politics course: The Baldwin Act, the reform movement at the turn of the century, council-city manager, council-committee, council-city commissioner, urban and regional reform and all the rest. My framework seems to me to help make sense of our urban/municipal history, to offer some indication of the directions in which we are headed now, and, not incidentally, to make the whole thing a little more interesting. We turn, therefore, to urban history.(14)

4.0 HISTORY

The fact that the weak government/strong government frame work is structured as a pair of ideal types in the Weberian manner makes them particularly useful as a tool for the understanding of historical trends. Strong government/weak government, like Weber's traditional authority/legal authority dichotomy, represents the theoretical extremes on a continuum that reflects reality. There is no society which fits perfectly either the model of traditional authority, or that of legal authority, but elements of both are observable in actual societies, and, in a historical review, it is possible to observe how societies have been transformed from primarily traditional societies to primarily bureaucratic ones. The same observations apply to the strong government/weak government dichotomy, except that it is—as we noted—constructed on a more modest scale. Neither strong government nor weak government exists in its pure form, at least in Canada, but each represents a set of ideas about municipal organization, a model which is both a theoretical possibility and an ideal that various political groups have, at various times, sought to make a reality. By observing the degree to which Canadian municipal institutions have, over the years, approximated each of these ideals, we can map out the course of municipal history in terms which are theoretically as well as politically meaningful.

4.1 The Reform Movement

If we view Canadian municipal history as a tug-of-war between weak-government and strong-government impulses, the pivotal event in that history is the reform movement at the turn of the century. Although similar reform movements took place in Canada and the United States during that period, it is Canadian municipal institutions which were more drastically affected, because, in Canada, the reform movement coincided with our first serious spurt of urban growth, with the result that the ideas of the reform movement were the dominant influence in building our institutions from the ground up. In the United States, the newly developing cities of the south and west were similarly affected as a rule, while cities of the north and east, having already established municipal institutions, were generally less drastically affected.(15)

What was the character of this reform movement which had such a drastic effect on Canadian cities? To some limited degree, it was anti-democratic: it involved proposals for limitations of the franchise, as well as enhanced property qualifications for both the franchise and for political candidacy.(16) To the extent that it was, it is outside of the framework being presented in these pages because, as we have seen, the weak government and strong government ideal types both belong within the liberal-pluralist democratic tradition. However, the anti-democratic elements of the reform movement were a relatively peripheral part of the reform movement and did not, on the whole, exercise a lasting influence.(17) The most central and influential features of the reform movement do fit into our framework: they belong into the weak-government tradition, and specifically into the separation-of-powers variant of that tradition. Indeed, in some respects they virtually duplicate the ideal type. They are based on a suspicion of strong government, one which, however, focuses on the evils of political control, while at the same time advocating strong administration. Reformers helped bring about stronger administration in the form of a professionalized municipal public service as well as modernized administrative organization and accounting. At the same time they took quintessential weak-government/separation-of-powers measures in order to weaken politicians, and undermine their ability to offer their constituents the kind of representation

a strong-government advocate would consider effective. These measures included small councils, multi-member wards or at-large systems, separate boards and commissions, and non-partisanship.

4.2 Confused Americanization

Two very significant points emerge from this analysis. The first is that Canadian urban municipal institutions were--from their very origins--built on American principles rather than the British strong-government idea which formed the main basis for senior-level political institutions in Canada. If anybody cares, it is a case of Americanization writ large, and virtually unnoticed. Although it was unnoticed--or, more likely because it was unnoticed--it took place to the accompaniment of confusion and ambivalence. As an example of the confusion, Ontario reformers touted the board of control system as a form of cabinet government at the municipal level. However, the board of control is elected at large and separately from the rest of council. It has the effect of dividing political power and weakening the aldermen, who are more directly representative of neighbourhoods than the board is. In terms of this analysis, it has more in common with the American senate than with a parliamentary cabinet. It furthers weak-government principles and clearly undermines strong government.(18)

4.3 Ambivalent Americanization

In addition to the confusion, there was also ambivalence as Canadian urban reformers grasped the American grail, but grasped it loosely. For example, the American city manager system weakens council and strengthens the administration in classic weak-government/separation-of-powers style. But Canadian city managers have never attained the power of their American counterparts, partly because it goes against their parliamentary grain to sneer at politicians and humiliate them the way their American colleagues occasionally do and partly because they lack the American managers unrestricted powers of appointment. Another example of ambivalence in the adaptation of American institutions is the Canadian unwillingness to accept the idea of a strong mayor. It seems clear that fragmented political institutions like those of the Americans create a vacuum of political power. The American solution has been presidentialism at the federal level and strong

mayors in the municipalities. But we have generally chosen not to give mayors the executive authority and the veto power which seems an almost inescapable conclusion to the logic of separation of powers. For some reason, our responsible government conscience, which lies dormant while at-large electoral systems and separate boards and commissions are created, suddenly springs to life at the mention of a strong mayor, and we reject the idea. In this respect, it seems we have managed to saddle ourselves with the worst of both worlds: a system with fragmented political authority and weak leadership as well. Our municipal institutions, then, have become seriously, if ambivalently, Americanized, though our awareness of this fact is somewhat muddled.

4.4 Municipal Folklore

A second significant point which emerges from the weak-government/strong-government analysis is that the weak-government ideas of the reform movement, in addition to bringing about a set of particular institutional changes, have created a conventional wisdom which has become a permanent part of the folklore of municipal government. The folklore--which expresses a distaste for political power at the municipal level, but does not convey a corresponding wariness about the dangers of administrative or private power-- is deeply rooted and is often repeated by people who obviously have no idea of the implications of what they are saying. "Let's keep politics out of this" means "Let's keep it honest." A "non-political forum" is one marked by sincerity and straight talk. A "businesslike" approach is a good one, a "political" one is bad. "Administrative efficiency" is always preferable to "political interference." All of these canards express the weak-government / separation-of-powers ideal: politicians should be kept weak, strong political control is undesireable and strong administration is desireable. These notions are of course part of our overall political lore, not just that of municipal government, but they have a particular relevance for municipal government.

4.5 Continuing Influence

More importantly, they have had a strong influence on the continuing course of municipal reform. For example, the standard reaction to almost any

municipal problem has been the demand that it be "taken out of politics," given to "experts" in order to achieve "strong administration." The result has been the proliferation of separate boards and commissions, each of which has gone yet another step in the direction of weakened political control and weakened legitimacy of politicians and political structures. This point is widely understood and does not require elaboration, but it has been less widely remarked that metropolitan and regional schemes have generally lent weight to the weak-government/separation-of-powers trend. As a rule, they feature indirect systems of representation and councils which are small in relation to the populations they are trying represent. That adds up to weak representation. The weak-government/separation-of-powers picture which emerges is completed by the strong administrative structures evident in metro Toronto and—to a lesser extent—in various other upper-tier municipal governments. The greater Vancouver regional district is an exception to the rule of strong administration, but it offers a particularly apt example of the rule of weak political control. Therefore, although metropolitan and regional schemes were often touted as a new departure in municipal government and a break with the past, the reality is that they were a further extension of the weak-government/separation-of-powers ideas that grew out of the reform movement at the turn of the century. They represented, not new ideas, but a continuation of existing trends.

4.6 The Enfeeblement of Municipal Government

The trends we have been observing enfeebled the political side of municipal government and robbed it of its legitimacy. They have been exacerbated by a wider change which has affected all of society: the bureaucratization and accompanying centralization which was described by Weber. The combined effect upon municipal government of all these changes has been devastating. A century ago, local authorities, either municipal or charitable, were largely in control of what we today consider the most important government programs: welfare, health care and education. However, municipal governments were not equal to the demands of the past half century for expanded government activity in these areas. Today, the role of local authorities in all these areas has been reduced to routine administration, while virtually all the important decisions are made at the senior levels of government. Even school boards,

which maintain some pretence of autonomy, no longer have any significant say in such crucial matters as curriculum, choice of textbooks, and pupil-teacher ratios. The only major decisions still being made by local authorities are those relating to land use, and even in this area restrictions imposed and conditional funds offered by senior governments have made major inroads on local autonomy.(19)

Why have municipal governments been reduced to little more than ciphers? Part of the reason is the one given by Weber: industrialization, urbanization and modern communications produce centralized forms of organization and require them in order to survive. Centralization is a concommitant of modern society, and probably inevitably so. That, however, does not mean that virtually all important decision making need be centralized. It is clear, for example, that a mobile population and a market economy will benefit from at least some central coordination of welfare and unemployment insurance. It is also obvious that a system of state medical insurance needs to be centrally coordinated. It is much less obvious that primary and secondary education require the all too visible hand of senior governments in order to function well. And it is not at all clear why provincial and federal governments have to get mixed up in decisions about local roads and urban development. Even if we accept Weber's ideas about centralization and bureaucratization uncritically, we have not fully explained the state of Canadian municipal government.

It seems clear that there is another reason: the municipal folklore and the institutional changes produced by the reform movement, and the loss of legitimacy which followed. The reformers at the turn of the century argued that local politicians were corrupt and incompetent, and they helped to establish a conventional wisdom that municipal administration can be improved by weakening politicians. As municipal political institutions were weakened during the reform movement and in the decades that followed, their prescriptions took on the character of a self-fulfilling prophesy. Municipal councils gradually stopped making important decisions, and municipal politics became less and less attractive to people with the ability and ambition to make important decisions. At best it became a way-station for ambitious

people on the way up, and an arena for an occasional public-spirited citizen with a sense of noblesse oblige. At worst, it attracted candidates who would not have stood a chance in provincial politics. Even if the reformers were wrong about politicians in the first instance—and it seems clear that they did at least exaggerate their case—the institutional changes they inspired helped, in the end, to confirm their allegations.

4.7 Reaction to the Reform Movement

A reaction against the ideas of the reform movement—a trend away from weak-government reforms and a revival of strong government ideas—finally began in the 1960s, but by that time the damage had been done and it was too late for mere institutional reforms to restore the strength of municipal government. The reaction against weak government took place at both the ideological and the practical level. James Lightbody articulated the sentiments of many when he wrote:

> ...it is my expectation that parties will adapt and respond to the complex challenges of our urban political communities. Under appropriate leadership they may become effective instruments for the reassertion of community control over government administration and for the generation of a public policy responsive to the demands of articulate civic leaders.(20)

Lightbody's article was reprinted in a book optimistically (from a strong-government point of view) entitled Emerging Party Politics in Urban Canada.(21) Indeed, parties and party-like groupings were emerging in municipal politics: T.E.A.M. in Vancouver, the reform caucus in Toronto, to name two of the more successful forays. By the late 1970s, even some members of Winnipeg's Independent Citizens' Election Committee—successor to the committee of 1000, the very fountainhead of reaction in Canada—were arguing in favour of municipal political parties. Another strong-government straw in the wind was the fact that a number of cities were abandoning at-large electoral systems in favour of wards.

But strong government's knight in shining armour was Winnipeg Unicity, the reform which was supposed to abolish weak municipal government. In its original version—later modified somewhat—it featured a party system, a large council elected by wards with the mayor responsible to it, and changes designed to ensure council authority over separate boards and commissions.

Even in its modified version, it represented a major thrust toward the establishment of strong-government principles. All of this, as well as the widespread disenchantment with it, has been thoroughly documented in the literature. It is painfully obvious that strong government reforms have not significantly increased the authority or legitimacy of municipal elected representatives. Why not? The answer, it seems clear, is that the loss of responsibilities and the loss of legitimacy which has reduced municipal government to its present state cannot be redressed merely by party activity, or even by that and a range of institutional reforms. If municipal government is to have any hope of regaining strength, it needs to be—and be seen as—an important centre of decision making power. If that were to happen, the people and the institutions would follow. Without that, municipal politics will continue to be greeted with the apathy and indifference which it unfortunately deserves.

4.8 Conclusions

In this section of the paper, I have tried to demonstrate that the strong-government and weak-government ideal types, described in a previous section, help us to understand our municipal history and to conceptualize the course of that history. In summary, the reform movement at the turn of the century left us with an ideology and a set of institutions which generally fit the ideal type referred to in these pages as weak-government/separation-of-powers. For the next half century or so, subsequent institutional changes were of a generally similar character. It was only in the 1960s that there were signs of a reaction to this trend. But the reaction was not strong enough to bring about a reversal of the trend and today we are left with institutions which are still primarily of the weak-government/separation-of-powers type.

The weak-government/strong-government framework has been set up so as to reflect the way in which municipal government participants and observers actually think about the issues which concern them, while at the same time allowing a more coherent and focused discussion of those issues. It is important to stress, at the same time, that the framework reflects ideas and theories about municipal government, not proven facts. The various elements of the framework should be regarded as hypotheses to be tested. For example,

those of us who lean toward strong government assume that parties, ward systems and a responsible executive will in fact produce a government which responds more decisively and effectively to social and economic problems. The experience of Unicity has not, to put it as mildly as possible, offered us much succor. I have tried to salvage our argument by suggesting that institutional changes do not—by themselves, and in the absence of an appropriate assignment of responsibilities—produce genuine strong government. But that is a fall-back position. It is not proof that strong municipal government is a viable option in Canada. Neither the idea of strong government, nor that of weak government, are proven ways of accomplishing what they claim to be able to achieve. Both need to be continually tested, and refined, in the arena of praxis.

5.0 THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

History is important in its own right. Those of us who are concerned with municipal government are bound to be interested in sorting out the municipal past, and trying to understand how and why various things happened. From a political perspective, however, history is particularly important as a source of insight into our current problems and into the ways we may be able to solve them in the years to come. Our framework should be helpful in this endeavour.

If the weak-government/strong-government analysis fulfills its Weberian assignment and meaningfully charts urban political trends of the last century, it should also offer some hints, at least, of possible future directions and the likely consequences of each. If it does not, we need to take our analysis back to the drawing board.

5.1 Limits of the Analysis?

At this point someone may object that an analysis which seeks to bring coherence to widely held beliefs of the past and present should not be used as a guide to the future. We can make the point from a left-wing perspective by asking the following question: can a frame work which explicitly limits itself to the debates among liberal pluralists of the past century be any help

in thinking about a future which we hope will take us beyond the liberal pluralism of the past? One possible answer to this question lies in pointing out that the framework contains the weak-government/public-choice alternative, which we have barely touched so far in these pages. Not good enough, a critic on the left may object: that only means that the analysis is worse than merely conventional, it lists to the right. It brings coherence to--and thereby perhaps seeks to justify--the middle-of-the-road pluralist thinking of the past. And the only future it points to--if the future is to be different from the past--is one of extreme right-wing reaction.

It is hard to refute such a line of argument conclusively, but it is possible to point to an alternative argument which makes more sense. We are not short of blue-prints for a better future. Political theory is full of them, and most of us have thought about these and have some idea about which ones we would like to realize. However, we cannot realize them unless we understand the directions of changes now underway and are able to sort out the historical forces which remain powerful from those which have spent themselves. An although we have plenty of theories about the future, our understanding of the present remains limited. In these pages, I am trying to help organize our thinking about the present, so that we may think more clearly about how to realize our hopes for the future. To put the point in Marxist terms: this paper tries to avoid the utopianism which afflicts so much political theory; it tries to lay a basis for thinking about how we can change the situation in which we actually find ourselves instead of constructing a better world out of whole cloth.

A second point needs to be made in answer to the "left-wing" critique sketched out above: left-wing and right-wing ideas are not always as clearly labelled as we might think. Warren Magnusson has cogently argued that both capitalist and socialist analyses of metropolitan reform share a statist bias(22) which--although it has inescapably become part of the socialist tradition--contradicts the beliefs of many socialists. He suggests that there may be elements in public choice thinking which could serve as an antidote to some of the statist excesses of both socialist and capitalist thought. According to Magnusson, therefore, public choice ideas may well contain

municipalities needs to be treated with extreme caution—Ontario's regional governments were also billed, entirely speciously, as devolutions of power—but they are worth investigating to try to determine whether significant changes are taking place and whether these could be the start of a trend. An equally impressionistic—but also intriguing—piece of evidence is a recent article on downtown revitalization schemes in the United States.(23) The article gives a detailed picture of the private and public-sector strategies which spawn such schemes and portrays municipal governments as far more enterprising and activist than I would have thought possible. Municipalities are pictured as prime movers in the initiation of such schemes, as skilfull negotiators and resourceful cutters of red tape. It is possible that new challenges in urban development, as well as changing directions in economic development, are having the effect of thrusting a new leadership role upon municipal politicians and officials. Changes such as these could mark the beginning of a new trend toward stronger municipal government ad more significant decision making at the local level. These suggestions are speculative, however, and need to be investigated.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

In these pages, I have set out a frame work for the analysis of urban ideology and urban organization which is designed to promote a more coherent and focused discussion of the issues surrounding changes in urban organization over the past century. The paper uses the framework to organize a discussion of municipal history in Canada and to broach some current issues. The discussion shows that the framework does serve its purpose of helping to explain our history and understand our current situation. The argument is presented in terms of my biases in favour of strong municipal government, but the weak-government/strong-government analysis is not intended as a tool for promoting my point of view. It is equally possible to put forward an argument in favour of either of the weak-government positions. Indeed, part of the usefulness of the framework is that it allows each position to be tested against the evidence. Standard strong-government arguments, for example, were tested against the experience of Winnipeg Unicity, and the result was that the strong-government argument was elaborated and modified somewhat to highlight

the importance of responsibilities as well as government structures. In the end, it is less important to win arguments than to increase our understanding and our ability to make urban government work for us.

Two of the major conclusions in these pages are worth reiterating. The first has to do with our municipal history and the second relates to our current situation. 1) Canadian municipal government is caught up in a long-term trend toward weak government of the separation-of-powers variety. This trend has not been reversed by such recent reforms as Winnipeg Unicity. 2) The trend is probably impossible to reverse unless it begins with an expansion of the responsibilities of municipal government. Further institutional tinkering, by itself, is unlikely to contribute significantly to a revival of municipal government's badly battered legitimacy. But a revival based on expanded responsibilities is not out of the question. Some early signs that it may be on the way are well worth further investigation.

APPENDIX

THE IDEAL TYPES: A SUMMARY

	STRONG GOVERNMENT	WEAK GOVERNMENT
PRINCIPALS	Pluralist	Pluralist
	Social Democratic	The Less Government The Better
	Responsible Government	Fragmentation/Division of
Powers		
	Optimistic View of Government	Pessimistic View of Government

	STRONG GOVERNMENT	SEPARATION OF POWERS (COMPROMISE POSITION)	PUBLIC CHOICE
INSTITUTIONAL	Large Council	Small Council	Fragmentation
FEATURES	Ward System	At-Large Elections	Duplication
	Mayor Responsible to Council	Mayor Elected at Large	Competition
	Partisan	Non-Partisan	Non-Partisan
	Council in Control	Separate Boards	Separate Boards
	Strong Mayor	Strong Mayor	
	Strong Administration	Strong Administration	Administration confined to narrowly defined tasks

NOTES

1. See Christopher Leo, <u>The Politics of Urban Development: Canadian Urban Expressway Disputes</u>(Toronto: Institute of Public Administration Canada, 1977).

2. In <u>The Reorganization of British Local Government: Old Orthodoxies and a Political Perspective</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

3. Paul Peterson, <u>City Limits</u> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

4. Among the most important sources supporting this position are: Government of Manitoba, <u>Proposals for Urban Reorganization in the Greater Winnipeg Area</u> (Winnipeg: Department of Urban Affairs, 1970); Committee of Review, City of Winnipeg Act, <u>Report and Recommendations</u>, Taraska Report (Winnipeg: Queens Printer, 1976); Dennis C. Hefferon, "Notes on Bill 36, The City of Winnipeg Act," in <u>Politics and Government of Urban Canada: Selected Readings</u>, 3rd edition, ed. Lionel D. Feldman and Michael D. Goldrick (Toronto: Methuen, 1976). A forerunner to these writings, and an advocate of similar institutional principles was the Report of the Maud Committee, <u>The Management of Local Government</u>, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1967).

5. See articles by George Langrod, Keith Panter-Brick and Leo Moulin, in <u>Politics and Government of Urban Canada: Selected Readings</u>, 4th edition, ed. Lionel D. Feldman (Toronto: Methuen, 1981), 3-27.

6. <u>Ibid</u>., 7.

7. <u>Ibid</u>., 27.

8. Max Weber, <u>Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundbriss der Verstehenden</u>, Studienausgabe (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 11976), 9-11.

9. Government of Manitoba, <u>Proposals for Urban Reorganization in the Greater Winnipeg Area</u>.

10. Committee of Review, City of Winnipeg Act, <u>Report and Recommendations</u>.

11. Report of the Maud Committee, <u>The Management of Local Government</u>.

12. Robert L. Bish and Vincent Ostrom, <u>Understanding Urban Government: Metropolitan Reform Reconsidered</u> (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1973), 20.

13.   <u>Ibid</u>., 30.

14.   An earlier version of these ideas was sketched in C. Leo, <u>The Politics of Urban Development</u>, Chapter 1.   However, the notion of strong government was not developed and the book was marked by what now seems an overzealous advocacy of responsible government ideas.

15.   In part, this argument was anticipated by J.D. Anderson, in "Nonpartisan Urban Politics in Canadian cities," in <u>Emerging Party Politics in Urban Canada</u>, ed. J.K. Masson and J.D. Anderson (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972).   Anderson argues that Canadian as well as western and southern United States cities developed an aversion to municipal political parties during the reform movement.   I am arguing that an aversion, not only to political parties, but also to a wider range of phenomena associated with strong government, became part of the political culture of cities which were in their infancy during the reform movement.

16.   Among the best sources for the interpretation of the reform movement presented in these pages are the pioneering writings of John Weaver and a good article by J.D. Anderson.   See John Weaver, <u>Shaping the Canadian City: Essays on Urban Politics and Policy, 1890 - 1920</u> (Toronto: Institute of Public Administration in Canada, 1977); and Weaver, "The Modern City Realized: Toronto Civic Affairs, 1880-1915," in <u>The Usable Urban Past: Planning and Politics in the Modern Canadian City</u>, ed. Alan F.J. Artibise and Gilbert A. Stelter (Toronto: Macmillian, 1979), 39-72.   The Anderson article is "The Municipal Government Reform Movement in Western Canada, 1880 - 1920," in <u>The Usable Urban Past</u>, 73-111.   Contrasting perspectives may be found in Paul Rutherford, ed., <u>Saving the Canadian City: The First Phase, 1880 - 1920</u> (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); and H.V. Nelles and C. Armstrong, "The Great Fight for Clean Government," <u>Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine</u> VI (October 1976): 50-66.

17.   In this regard, the Anderson article, cited above, is wide of the mark.   In arguing that "The reform model of local government was anti-democratic in the extreme..." ("The Municipal Government," 97), it is conflating economic democracy and political democracy.   Those who believe that a "real" democracy is an interventionist regime with a social conscience are tempted to characterize the reform movement as anti-democratic, because it certainly did promote weak government and oppose social-democratic interventionism.   But the anti-democratic elements in a strictly political sense—such as restrictions on the franchise—were a relatively small part of the reform movement's total program.

18.   Weaver seems to perceive this point in <u>Shaping the Canadian City,</u> 68 but he does not put the point across clearly.   The reformers' confusion has outlived the reform movement.   It is evident in current urban politics texts which perpetuate the misleading equation of the board of control with cabinet government, or with Quebec's municipal

executive committees. See, for example, Donald J.H. Higgins, <u>Urban Canada: Its Government and Politics</u> (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), 115; and C.R. Tindal and S. Nobes Tindal, <u>Local Government in Canada</u>, 2nd edition (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1984), 114.

19. For example, in my 1977 study of urban expressway disputes it was clear in all three cases---Toronto, Edmonton and Vancouver---that senior government intervention was crucial to the resolution of this quintessentially local issue. Leo, <u>The Politics of Urban Development</u>. Many similar examples could be cited.

20. James Lightbody, "The Rise of Party Politics in Canadian Local elections," <u>Journal of Canadian Studies</u>, 6 (February 1971): 44.

21. Masson and Anderson, <u>Emerging Politics in Urban Canada</u>.

22. Warren Magnusson, "Metropolitan Reform in the Capitalist City," <u>Canadian Journal of Political Science</u>, 14, 3 (1981): 557-585.

23. Bernanrd J. Frieden and Lynne B. Sagalyn, "Downtown Shopping Malls and the New Public-Private Strategy" (Cambridge, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1984, mimeo).

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