The Canada UK Colloquia

The Future of Cities in Britain and Canada

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Summary of Discussions

Ian Jackson

The preceding papers were presented at a colloquium, and this volume should therefore reflect the ensuing discussions. What follows is inevitably selective and much abbreviated; it is based on a spontaneous summary given at the close of the colloquium.

First session: Cities and the Communications Revolution

Two themes seemed to pervade both the papers and the subsequent discussion:

    (a) How can the communications revolution be reconciled with the human preference for direct contact: can we define this reconciliation in any way that is useful in shaping our urban future?

    (b) Perhaps a subset of the above: Are these new communications options likely to weaken the influence of the major cities, or will this influence be reinforced?

  On these themes, for instance, Hall suggested that 'there is an enormous difference between the present situation and what might happen in the near future'. Maffini, however, in a paper that otherwise seemed strongly oriented towards revolutionary change, remarked that 'As far as I can observe, I see little change in the underlying social amenity values

used to determine home location.' (I wonder about that: surely there have been changes in the way that the 'seven ages of man' are reflected in place of residence.)

In practical terms, **Lanctôt** told us what is being done in Montreal to reconcile both communications **technology** and the desire for human contact with access to governmental and other services. Many other cities are moving in the same direction, but **Lanctôt** certainly left me feeling that the successful approach (Montreal's or another city's) would be based not on providing access to specific (mainly govemmental) information, but on its relevance to the daily pattern of life of the community.

Later (maybe in another session), someone reminded us that these citizen information access systems may work for the majority, but they may also contribute to widening the separation of minorities.

Very early in the discussion, Adams brought up a theme that seemed pervasive throughout the colloquium. It might be summarized as 'planning ain't what it used to be.' This was emphasized again later by **Divay.** To some extent it appeared to be denied by both John Hall and Ray Spaxman, who suggested that the 'old' planning still exists, and is indeed the way that visions may be developed and even realized. However, even they might agree that on to the rather simplistic notion of national, regional and local **planning** a much broader view has been grafted over the decades.

When pushed, Maffini argued that decentralization has been propelled less by individuals seizing options, as by corporations going after what made sense in their terms. But some dissension was evident here also.

Another theme emerged in this first session that was to be pervasive: what **Marston** called the 'human need for ownership of issues'. This clearly goes well beyond the human need for contact.

On Canadian/UK contrasts, Hall reminded us of the line that Britain has too much history and not enough geography, and *vice versa* in Canada. This proposition was endorsed in the Montreal context by **Poirier.**

At the end of the discussion, Parkinson suggested that cities are returning to their classical function as leaders and arbiters. He was evidently not terribly impressed by the people who have replaced the princes as conspicuous consumers.

Second session: **Neighbourhoods:** Ghettos **or Cultural** Mosaics?

My main impression in regard to this theme was that the speakers were, or were perceived to be, more optimistic than their audience. When I voiced this reaction, however, the speakers seemed to say that they had been misunderstood!

Robson arranged his presentation under three headings — myths, numbers and sizes, and future needs and policies. In fairness, the keyword

I have in my own notes from his presentation is 'perplexity', which may be a more normal, and perhaps more acceptable, emotion in a planner than optimism. **Robson** stressed the very different characteristics of the minorities issue in different British cities. He offered us a 'hot potato' in the form of a recommended policy of drug legalization. Like good Canadians, however, we refused to deal with hot potatoes.

Bedford startled us by being not merely optimistic but enthusiastic. It is only safe to enthuse about your job, at least to the extent that Bedford did, when you are far away from those who determine what your salary will be next year. He took us through the stages in Toronto's development, with special emphasis on the 1970s and **1980s.** By 1990, he suggested, it was becoming a private rather than a public enviromnent, and from the discussion this seemed to be true also of British cities.

Since Toronto is often viewed as a near-utopia among North American cities, especially by US visitors, it was interesting, though not reassuring, to be told that the city's success with **neighbourhoods** was largely accidental. Bedford also painted a picture of the future Toronto that was not the popular image. Finally, and again controversially, he called for a bold public vision of Toronto's future.

This need for vision was queried in the ensuing discussion. Other needs were urged as more important. We discussed the special problem of Montreal: integration to two cultures, not one.

Marston suggested that the real trouble, in terms of numbers, starts at the bottom: the ghetto is perceived as a place where people, including most of those who live there, don't want to be. We discussed optimism versus pessimism, and whether Canada really accepts the implications of the cultural mosaic. Maffini reminded us that immigrants may be more single-minded in pursuing limited objectives than planners assume.

Third session: City planning

Within a European context, Parkinson emphasized the major changes in the way we look at UK cities that took place during the 1980s. The view that private sector problems should find their solutions in the public sector had been largely reversed. Intense unevenness had emerged between regions, between cities and within cities.

By contrast, Spaxman focused on general principles, and offered some *desziferata* − or perhaps sine qua *nons* − for successful cities. The latter, he suggested, are those that are able to 'get it all together'. Parkinson had provided some spectacular examples of cities that had failed to do this.

The discussion, by this stage, was showing some signs of *'déjà vu* all over again'. One sensed that the examples used (Glasgow, Liverpool, Toronto and Vancouver especially) were familiar stuff to those who lived in the respective countries, but it was not so easy to draw conclusions that remained useful after they had crossed the Atlantic. Hall may have come

closest to such a conclusion when he suggested that the 'bottom line' was whether what elected representatives (or their officials) did made any real difference. The answer, on the evidence offered in this and the preceding session, seemed to be that their potential for positive action might be limited, but it was clear that they could do real harm. And that led us back to the usefulness of a vision.

Fourth session: Cities **and Sustainable Development**

In one sense, this was an obligatory session for such a colloquium in 1990, and it seemed to be taken for granted that the concept was very relevant to city futures. Looking at the problem from the perspective of the water cycle, Emery argued that the problems are essentially not technological in character, but are issues of cost and associated political will. This view was challenged to some extent in subsequent discussion, but Emery maintained his position.

Divay's presentation basically asked: How can we accelerate rates of change in our cities? This implies that we know what has to be done, or at least the general direction of necessary change. On the micro scale (e.g. tree planting, safe disposal of old household appliances), this is no doubt true. But Bedford might say that there should be an overall vision before the individual parts are tackled.

Maffini asked whether population size is critical to sustainability, but the general response was that it should not be. One item from the earlier discussion on neighbourhoods seemed relevant here: against the popular view in both countries, the concentration of new immigrants from overseas in the major cities may be a key factor in the revitalization of these cities.

The discussion generated other heresies: 'linear is beautiful', and centralization may be a better basis than decentralization for tackling environmental problems. These are obviously half-truths at best — it is easy to think of situations where they do not apply — but they were stimulating heresies nevertheless.

Fifth session: Responsible City Government

Brooke's presentation of Britain in the 1980s clearly left the Canadian participants thinking 'How different from the municipal life of our beloved towns and cities'. His basic thesis was that out of ten years of revolution has come a new sense of purpose and approach that has revitalized local governments — provided that the revolution is complete! His postscript to the paper published in this volume indicates that it is not.

The Canadians, especially those from Ottawa, will also remember his quotation of one British politician recently: 'The problem with morale in the civil service is that it is not yet low enough.'

In contrast, Dewar described a chronic Canadian situation that may have been typical of Britain before the 1980s. In particular, she explored the myth that because local government is local it is therefore more responsive. Her argument that national political parties may be vital for improved local government met some mild objections from **Robson** and others, but no real debate. There was however some useful semantic argument, in which the word 'oxymoron' was audible, about such terms as 'responsible municipal government' and 'market democracy'.

Still on semantics, Canadian participants learned that 'community charge' indicates approval of the present system of municipal taxation in Britain, whereas 'poll tax' clearly means disapproval. The system may however be replaced before we get the chance to use this knowledge on our next transatlantic trip, Parkinson argued that whatever one called the mechanism, it has helped to destroy a sense of community.

On the general topic of municipal finance, a plea was made for more assured financing. Canada's Treasury Board (and Mrs Thatcher, if either had been at the colloquium) would probably have responded that someone has to run tax policy and money supply, and local government has little incentive to worry about such things. Similarly, the argument that cities should be able to balance their budgets was countered by the statement that local government is basically redistributive.