Introduction

Popular rhetoric suggests that the twenty-first century has ushered in an era of homogeneity. Canada's distinctive local communities appear to be weighed down with baggage from the post-industrial world. Urbanization, globalization, amalgamation, media conglomeration, and technological convergence are terms coined to reflect the cumulative effect of diverse forces at work in communities across the country. Given such pressures, to what extent can people living in those communities make decisions about their own environments, either individually or collectively? To what extent can they govern themselves?

Many Canadian communities have adopted some standard responses to the imperatives of globalization. Indisputably, Canadian towns and cities are similar in many ways, and it is important to recognize those commonalities. It would be a serious error, however, to ignore the unique set of circumstances that shapes and influences the way in which each locality governs itself. Canada is an interwoven tapestry of diverse communities situated in their own social, political, economic, and physical landscapes.

Each Canadian community has a distinctive political culture. To be persuaded of this point, one need only pause to consider how local governance might differ in places such as Toronto, Ontario (one of the largest cities in North America), the wheat-based prairie town of Brandon, Manitoba, or the remote (primarily Inuit) community of Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut. A closer observation would reveal how each of these communities has its own mix of social, cultural, and physical characteristics that offer specific challenges for governance. Across the country, communities and their governments provide a mosaic of responses – sometimes creative and sometimes mundane – to unpredictable global and domestic environments.

Each of the following chapters offers vignettes and illustrations about how some very different Canadian communities govern themselves and are governed. Examples from communities across Canada highlight these discussions, with particular attention paid to the medium-sized cities of Saint John, New Brunswick; Sherbrooke, Quebec; the twin cities of Kitchener and Waterloo, Ontario; and Prince George, British Columbia (see Table I.1). These municipalities were chosen to illustrate some of the differences and similarities between five Canadian cities in four regions, each of which possesses its own unique set of characteristics, including political culture, history, economy, physical location and characteristics, institutional structures, and communications patterns.

Examples of mid-sized cities

City or region	Population[a]	Land area (km^2)
Saint John	69,661 (2001)	316
Sherbrooke	75,916 (2001) 140,000 post-amalgamation (2002)	58 366 post-amalgamation
(2002)[b]		
Region of Waterloo (includes Kitchener and Waterloo)	438,515 (2001)	1,369
Kitchener	190,399 (2001)	137
Waterloo	86,543 (2001)	64
Prince George	72,406 (2001)	316

a   The population statistics often do not capture university and college students. The City of Waterloo, for example, has well over 100,000 residents if the population of its two universities is included.

b   This land mass is an approximation based on the former Sherbrooke metropolitan census area, much of which is now covered by the new City of Sherbrooke. As such, large portions of this city are now rural, encompassing many former cities with their own urban centres.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Community Profiles, http://www12.statcan.ca/english/Profil01/PlaceSearchForm1.cfm; Société de Développement Économique de Sherbrooke (SDES), http://www.sdes.ca/tourism/ .

Saint John is Canada's first incorporated city, and it is situated beside its historic port in eastern Canada. The traditional perceptions of local self-government go back to the Loyalist settlers who first demanded some local political autonomy (see Box I.1).

The newly amalgamated City of Sherbrooke, in the rolling hills of the eastern Quebec townships, comprises a majority of French-speaking residents and a significant minority of English speakers, who are represented by strong community associations. One can find evidence of both French- and English-Canadian cultures in the city's landscape, history, and municipal politics (see Box I.2).

Occasionally referred to as the "Twin Cities," Kitchener and Waterloo are situated in densely populated, heavily industrialized, southwestern Ontario. The business sector has been strongly influential in shaping all cities, but early in their history, these two municipalities developed a reputation amongst others for entrepreneurialism, industriousness, and active private-sector involvement in civic affairs (see Box I.3).

Prince George is a rugged resource-based city located in the centre of British Columbia. A pioneering spirit has shaped Prince George's political culture, with the long-time local residents accustomed to self-sufficiency and a tough physical environment (see Box I.4).

I.1 Saint John, New Brunswick

Saint John is Canada's oldest incorporated city, although St. John's, Newfoundland, is thought to be the oldest city in Canada. It had been inhabited for thousands of years by indigenous peoples and eventually became a French colony in 1608. Early inhabitants of the area included the Micmac and then the Meliseet peoples. Today Saint John is the province's main metropolitan centre, and it is the only city in the province with a charter (this is characteristic of Canada's oldest cities). Because of its history, Saint John boasts many Canadian firsts, including the country's first political riot (1785), the first chartered bank, the first municipal water system (1837), the first penny newspaper (*Saint John News*), and the first Town Planning Act (1912). The historic port City of Saint John has often struggled with poverty and can be characterized as an industrial town with a history of economic difficulties. Journalist Charles Lynch described his hometown in the following terms:

> Once the grimy place that no amount of cosmetic paint could disguise or brighten, its only refuge in the vocabulary of tourism being the words "old" or "quaint." But once moribund industries came back to life and the city reached the point where finally, in the 1970s, it could stand back a pace and get a look at itself and decide to create some beauty to go with its commercial achievements. And so in the 1980s, Saint John became a city reborn, a better place for those who live there.[1]

This city has seen a number of successful urban revitalization initiatives in the core area, including the "oldest continuous market" in the country. The industrial presence is quite visible, with its refineries and pulp and paper mills. Recently, arts festivals and other economic development, as well as tourism – based on historic sites, parks, gardens, and the Fundy tides – have contributed to a more diversified cityscape.

Saint John was the provincial capital of New Brunswick for only a brief period in the late 1700s. Nevertheless, it has many attributes of a capital city, in terms of its political history, economy, culture, and location. Early in its history, Saint John became the commercial centre of New Brunswick.[2] It is the province's largest city, with a population of approximately 70,000 people (or 123,000 if one also considers the nearby parishes and towns in the census metropolitan area). It is a bilingual city in Canada's only bilingual province (a benefit of its English and Acadian heritage) with an increasingly skilled workforce, backed up by a good communications and transportation infrastructure. As an important centre in the province, Saint John appears to have a strong sense of local political culture, the seeds of which were planted long ago with the United Empire Loyalists who emigrated here in the thousands from the United States after the Revolutionary War.

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1 Malcolm M. Somerville, introduction to *Saint John: A City of Achievements,* 2nd ed. (Saint John, NB: ImPresses, 2000).
2 Dan Soucoup, *Historic New Brunswick* (Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1887).

I.2 Sherbrooke, Quebec

This mid-sized city celebrated its two-hundredth anniversary in 2002; its roots can be traced back to a small village named Hyatt Mills in 1802. Unlike other parts of the province, the majority of settlers in the area were primarily of British origin. Hyatt Mills was renamed Sherbrooke in 1918 after the governor general of Canada.

Historically, Sherbrooke has acted as the hub of the Eastern Townships of Quebec. With its motto being "More than just a City," it draws attention to the fact that residents and visitors can benefit from all the conveniences of diversified urban centres located in the middle of a natural resort.

Like any mid-size city, the old City of Sherbrooke has its share of industry and of strip malls lining some main streets. It also boasts some gracious old stone churches and halls built in the early part of the twentieth century. Walking paths and biking trails traverse the Rivière Magog and the Lac des Nations. The hilly terrain offers numerous vistas of old residential areas, parks, light industrial development, modern subdivisions, and parks. The new city has a number of French and English universities and colleges.[1]

Sherbrooke has seen many changes over the years. Debate over language rights has played an important part in defining the local political culture. This issue has not only affected the nature of federal-provincial Canadian politics, it has also had a profound effect on local politics. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, the interests of the English were given priority in business and other decisions governing the community. In Sherbrooke, it was noted that in 1912, "not only did the city council conduct its meetings in English but the city employees were also all English-speaking and spoke only their own language. The most important part of the course at the technical school in Shawinigan consisted of learning English, since this was the only way a French-Canadian worker could obtain a promotion in the town's large factories."[2] Over the course of the twentieth century, the domination of the English language over French was to be reversed. Today, Sherbrooke sees itself as a bilingual city, although French predominates.

In 2002, Sherbrooke's population swelled to approximately 140,000 when it was amalgamated with a number of other cities in the region as part of the provincial government's overall municipal restructuring initiative. In the process, the much smaller anglophone communities that were merged into the new city found themselves facing a new dynamic, as the majority of speakers in the restructured region spoke French as their first language.

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1 Sherbrooke Historical Society in Cooperation with the University of Sherbrooke, *Sherbrooke 1802-2002: Two Centuries of History*, CD-ROM (Sherbrooke: Sherbrooke Historical Society, 2002).
2 Paul André Linteau, René Durocher, and Jean-Claude Robert, *Quebec: A History, 1867-1929*, trans. Robert Chodos (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1983), 53.

I.3 Kitchener and Waterloo, Ontario

The two cities of Kitchener and Waterloo (KW) are generally undistinguished by their physical appearance from other municipalities in densely populated southwestern Ontario. The two cities, each with its own municipal government, have physically grown together. They share a main street that traverses two urban cores, both of which are in various stages of decline and renewal.

Kitchener and Waterloo are part of a two-tier system of government. The upper governing tier is the Regional Municipality of Waterloo. The Regional Municipality also has responsibilities for Cambridge, another mid-size city in the region, as well as the townships of North
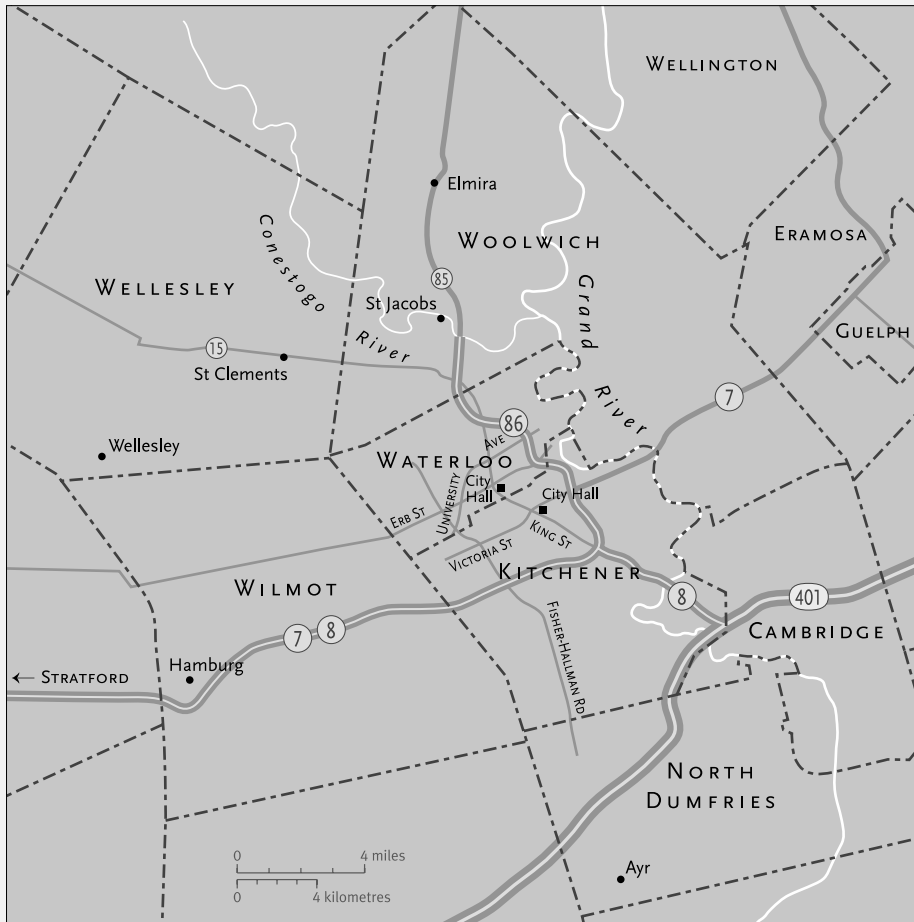
Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot, and Woolwich. The regional government coordinates joint services, while the city governments administer in distinctly different styles reflecting their unique political cultures, heritage, and requirements.

Both cities have a generous share of parks and wooded areas that encircle well-kept residential areas, and they have burgeoning suburbs on the edges. Waterloo received the gold award at the 2003 International Awards for Livable Communities. Congested streets, growing automobile traffic on the encircling expressways, and poor air quality, however, are unfortunate by-products of the cities' location and rapidly growing population. KW can also boast a unique cultural heritage that can be traced back to the early settlers of the towns, many of whom were hard-working Mennonites and industrious German immigrants.

A closer look, however, reveals some interesting distinctive characteristics of each city. Kitchener is the larger of the two, with a population of approximately 190,000 people. The older part of Kitchener, once called Berlin, reveals its manufacturing legacy as aging industrial buildings intermingle with residential areas in the centre of town. The business community has always played an active role in city politics, and a strong civic culture permeates the operations of the business community. Activism also constitutes part of the downtown culture, where public campaigns bring attention to politically marginalized citizens, such as the poor or homeless, or rallies encourage environmentally friendly transportation alternatives.

Kitchener's adjoining neighbour, Waterloo, has a population of 86,500, but over 100,000 if its student population is included. Waterloo has quite a different political and social culture. It is best known for being the location of the head office of large insurance corporations, for having two universities, Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier, and for its technological economic base. Throughout the 1990s, Waterloo's local government administration decided to adopt a business mantle. Its emphasis has been on service delivery, economic and operational efficiency, and attracting investment. Historically, Waterloo has not had to support social services to the same degree as Kitchener, in part because many important social services and the most affordable housing are located in Kitchener. On the other hand, Waterloo does have to deal with housing and other challenges associated with a large, transient student population.

Although the political cultures of Kitchener and Waterloo seem quite different from each other in a number of ways, even more distinct are the neighbouring self-governing Mennonite communities. The German and Mennonite heritage remains a strong part of the social and physical composition of the Region of Waterloo. Peaceful Old Order Mennonites farm the nearby rural areas and shun many modern conveniences, along with the politics, lifestyles, and local governments of their urban neighbours.

I.3 Kitchener and Waterloo, Ontario

I.4 Prince George, British Columbia

Prince George, a city of approximately 72,000, lies at the confluence of two great rivers, the Fraser and the Nechako, and at the intersection of two main provincial highways. The self-titled "Northern capital of British Columbia" is close to 55 degrees latitude, in the geographic centre of the province. To the vast bulk of the Canadian population, which has arranged itself along the Canada-US border, however, Prince George is viewed as a remote city located in the vast, undefined north.

From the top of high, sand-cut riverbanks, one can readily observe that pulp and paper has served as the economic staple for the life of this relatively young city. Pulp mills provide a backdrop, while other signs of industry and rail yards wind around its perimeter. In the "bowl," a depressed downtown reflects hurried early growth and lack of careful town planning. Modest residential areas composed of older frame and stucco houses give way to modern suburbs as streets climb up rolling hills covered with spruce, pine, and fir. Beyond is wilderness and scattered subdivisions, where bears and other wildlife share space with residential and commercial developments that line the two major intersecting highways.

As can be seen from Table I.1, Prince George has a large land mass relative to its population, allowing plenty of room for growth. (This stands out in contrast to the physically smaller city of Waterloo, for example, where residential development is pushing up against municipal boundaries.) Signs of recent economic prosperity in the "Spruce City" are evident in the juxtaposition of the new with the old; the 1990s saw the construction of numerous public buildings as the city experienced rapid growth and economic renewal. In less than two hundred years, this city has seen dramatic change from its inception as an isolated trading post to a sprawling city of contrasts. The city faces some challenges related to unemployment, social disparity, environmental concerns, and stresses to its traditional pulp and paper resource economy – specifically the ongoing Canada-US softwood lumber dispute. The first inhabitants of the region, the Carrier First Nations, are struggling to achieve political voice, economic necessities, and social stability in the city.

Prince George's locally elected, at-large city council is a fairly homogeneous, middle-class group that, over time, has worked actively with business and community leaders to bring development and services to the city. The local political culture is very lively, with a strong sense of self-sufficiency. Community leaders are also determined to obtain their fair share of provincial resources. As a northern city, Prince George strives to gain political recognition from the provincial government and to achieve equitable treatment with southern communities in terms of adequate services and resources. Its tenacity has paid off in many ways, one of the most notable being the successful campaign by many community leaders in Prince George and other northern towns to acquire its most recent, free-standing, post-secondary educational institution – the University of Northern British Columbia.

Part 1   Local Democracy, a Contested Notion

This book poses a question: Are we governing ourselves? It also raises a series of related questions, and one of the first to come to mind is "Who are we?" Are *we* all the citizens and residents of Canada and its communities? Are *we* elected officials, grassroots activists, members of multicultural associations, volunteers, public administrators, or business people? We might also ask ourselves – as individuals and members of a collectivity – whether we actually do govern ourselves or whether we have abandoned our responsibility for decision making by allowing other forces or actors determine our political environment. Does the mere act of voting constitute self-government, or is active citizen engagement required for a self-governing community?

If we do govern ourselves, how do we do it? What factors, tools, or avenues do we use to influence community decisions? Do we participate through the formal political process or informally through community associations? Perhaps we are non-voting individuals who participate unknowingly in local politics through personal choices that govern our daily lives.

The answers to these questions, and the relative degree of political influence we have individually and collectively, depend on the framework we use to make sense of our local political environment. Questions of political influence can be considered through different approaches that emphasize the relative importance of some factors over others. It is through an examination of these differing perspectives that we can identify the different actors and influences that shape local political power structures and communities. Much depends upon the relative weight given to determining variables (such as physical context, institutions, economics, and so on) as well as to their interrelationships.

Academic discussions invariably revolve around how local communities are shaped and by whom – or to put it in traditional political science terms, "who gets what, when, and how."[1] The ability of certain individuals or groups to influence local politics reflects how well these actors are positioned to take advantage of the key factors that affect local politics. These factors include ideology, political and cultural values, legal and political institutions, administrative and organizational structures, economics, geography, the biophysical and social environment, and communications.

The rapidly changing global environment and a diminishing sense of citizen effectiveness at the local level have many observers debating the fundamental values underpinning our governing institutions. One persistent belief is that local government can and should play an important role in promoting some form of democracy through local elections and public participation. The public is expected to influence political agendas through their local councillors, mayors, and those elected to other positions. In turn, those elected are supposed to represent the needs of neighbourhoods and local communities.

Political theorists debate the degree to which formal governing institutions can achieve this democratic ideal. Some suggest that democratic politics is most likely to occur outside the state (that is, outside the formal political institutions) where activists pressure for change in society-centred activities. A distinction is drawn between the study of *government,* which focuses on the formal structures of government, and the study of

governance, which sees local politics as taking place beyond formal institutions and operating within society as a whole. From this focus on governance, it can be argued that democracy might best be pursued through the activities of grassroots citizen activities, volunteer organizations, social, cultural, and religious organizations, and pressure groups. Civil society, then, becomes the important centre of democratic activity. Directly or indirectly, citizens are influential participants in local governance.

George Francis offers the following distinction between *governance* and *government*: "Governance can be defined as the collective results from the exercise of authority and control through multiple governmental and other organizations, each following their own decision-making processes. The concept of governance extends beyond 'government' and the roles that government agencies play, to include corporate and other private sector, non-governmental organizations."[2]

Governments, communities, and others are now grappling with this concept of governance and how, and if, it should be applied or encouraged. The founding principles and practices of formal representative institutions leave local governments ill equipped to respond to many popular demands that spring from differing contemporary conceptions of a democratic society.