Local GOVERNANCE in Transition

Toward Sustainable Canadian Communities

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INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING LOCAL

The Internet of Things, resilient cities, sustainable social-ecological systems, adaptation to climate change, sharing economies, disruptive technology, the Anthropocene, inclusive cities, and knowledge co-production are all issues now registering on the public radar. Many have been around for decades but were confined to the more theoretical realm of the academic or specialist. Along with other developments, however, they are rapidly redesigning the local political landscape. This swiftly shifting environment requires a whole suite of responses from local decision makers – people who are attempting to learn and respond to the very real and immediate emergencies presenting themselves on any number of fronts. Nevertheless, local governments are still constrained by an institutional legacy bestowed on them long ago and by provincial overseers who frequently appear committed to maintaining the constitutional status quo.

What is this legacy, why do we have local governments, and what purpose do they serve? A review of the early origins of Canadian municipalities suggests that, in large part, they were initially the result of a British decision to achieve some peace and stability in the unruly colonies. Subsequently, as cities and suburbs sprung up across the country, local governments were viewed as useful institutions for delivering services efficiently and effectively. These priorities remain today. We are now motoring our way through the third decade of the twenty-first century. Local governments continue to attempt to fulfill the functions traditionally ascribed to them, but additional governing imperatives and public expectations are being piled on at a bewildering speed. Perhaps it is time to reconceptualize, or at the very least to expand, our functional notion of local governments as efficient providers of local services, political stability, and modest exercises in political participation. Cities have a central part to play in a global, existential project to sustain the vital social and ecological systems on which we collectively depend. This book focuses on the role that local government could play or – in some illuminating cases – is already playing to foster sustainability in an era of unprecedented technological, social, and environmental change.

TRADITIONAL ROLES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In the eighteenth century, prior to Confederation, local governments were introduced to instill a measure of political stability and order to British North America. The new Canadian federation was formed in 1867 with a centralist national government in place to subdue provincial political discord while facilitating continental commercial expansion. Local governments were placed under provincial jurisdiction. As political scientist Peter J. Smith (1987, 28) has noted, "The localist attachments in Canadian political culture ... would have to be satisfied with the greatly inferior provincial governments they were given." In the unsettled West, municipal-style government did not arrive until the late 1880s. The Hudson's Bay Company and the Canadian Pacific Railway were dominant

corporate forces that shaped early settlement and development patterns. The northern territories were assigned a different type of administrative structure due to their unique political, demographic, cultural, and geographic characteristics.

In the growing cities of North America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, local decision makers, planners, and engineers were influenced by science-based forms of utilitarianism to advance what was considered the public good – a conception that frequently coincided with the interests of those who owned property and businesses. Also present during these years were some more radical city planning approaches that promoted public health and welfare, social assistance, housing, and improved health conditions. For the most part, however, planning reflected the "progressive" business mood of the day and was spurred on by an urban reform movement ostensibly directed at eliminating the corrupt politics that were perceived to interfere with efficient city management. The "city beautiful" approach was based on notions of aesthetic, efficient, scientific planning and zoning.[1] Establishing parks, boulevards, civic centres, and good transportation routes was expected to result in an orderly, beautiful, and prosperous city while enhancing the value of land.

Such ideals continued to prevail in the ensuing century; local governments have been considered important because they provide public services at a scale that cannot be managed efficiently by a central government. They have also been valued for the opportunities that they offer in terms of public participation and pluralism by creating "alternative sources of political power rooted in elected territorial governments" (Sancton 2011, 25). Local governments have long been viewed as important institutions for fostering local democracy and civics – a position argued by two well-known nineteenth-century theorists, Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill. Liberal-democratic principles associated with individual and property rights and with the public interest could be achieved through representative government and regularly held universal elections. These ideas are popular today, although in the 1800s, "universal" and "rights" generally referred to male, property-owning citizens. The majority of inhabitants were thereby excluded: the First Peoples, women, many racialized and religious groups, and others (see Chapter 2).

Pragmatism and political expediency underlay much of the early impetus for local government. Its importance was downplayed in comparison to that of the provincial and national governments. Over time, this perspective began to shift, resulting in an evolution away from mid-twentieth-century arguments about the limited importance of local government (Crawford 1954; Dahl 1961) and toward a twenty-first-century public awareness that many of the most crucial social and ecological issues of our times arise in cities. Local governments are now tasked with addressing many of them. Unfortunately, municipalities lack many of the tools and resources and much of the political authority required to do so.

Provincial governments very often (although not always) treat local governments primarily as effective vehicles for the delivery of services. One notable example is the Ontario Progressive Conservative government's introduction of the Efficient Local Government Act in 2018. The government unilaterally introduced this legislation and cut the size of the City of Toronto's council from forty-four to twenty-five councillors, citing efficiency and cost savings. Both in Toronto and elsewhere across Canada, the action generated outrage among numerous communities of interest, whose members viewed the province's conduct as both undemocratic and counterproductive in terms of effective governance (Kalvapalle 2018). Nevertheless, the provincial government prevailed in this matter and others, claiming its legal right to overrule the city government. It even went so far as to threaten to invoke the notwithstanding clause, Section 33 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This clause (which enables provinces to opt out of the Charter) has rarely been used. Such a move might be seen by the public as a way to quash their rights and freedoms. Soon thereafter, further unprecedented pieces of legislation followed in rapid succession, undermining the efforts of local governments to sustain their cities' environments, services, and democracy. The ways that different provincial governments perceive and value municipal governments have varied over time and between jurisdictions (see Chapter 2).

REDEFINING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Progress in cities is frequently equated with material economic development. City decision makers rely on property development (and its accompanying revenue) to provide public goods and services and to encourage investment and employment. Economic growth draws people and capital into the city, thereby generating more property development and associated infrastructure. Technological developments have hastened the speed of production and the growth of material wealth, leading to the ever-increasing consumption of resources. As Enzo Tiezzi wrote in *The End of Time* (1984),

> "Time is money." Progress is measured by speed of production ... The faster we transform nature, the more time we save ... Nature obeys different laws to economics, it works in "entropic time":[2] the faster we consume natural resources and the energy available in the world, the less time is left for our survival. "Technological time" is inversely proportional to "entropic time"; "economic time" is inversely proportional to "biologic time."
>
> Our limited resources and the limited resistance of our planet and its atmosphere clearly indicate that the more we accelerate the energy and matter flow through our Earth system, the shorter is the life span of our species. (Cited in Pulselli and Tiezzi 2009, 25)

In response to emerging societal and environmental demands, local decision makers are now being pressured to reconsider some of their fundamental assumptions, structures, and processes. Analysts and local governments are beginning to acknowledge that the conventional approach of measuring prosperity solely through economic indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP) is of limited utility in determining a population's well-being. A holistic group of indicators, such as the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (n.d.) (see Chapter 13), would provide a more accurate assessment. These more comprehensive assessment tools suggest that equating prosperity solely with the speedy, efficient production and consumption of material goods is counterproductive. It works against the social, ecological, and economic well-being of cities and their residents both now and in the long run. In this context, local governments require a much more nuanced approach when defining their roles and functions than has historically been the case.

Notions of local democracy have also shifted with the times (see Chapter 5). In the latter half of the twentieth century, assisted by the proliferation of communications media, members of the public became politically active beyond traditional means. Different constituencies began to participate in local governance outside of representative democracy's formal mechanisms of voting, presenting petitions to city council, and running for local councils, agencies, or boards. Expectations of meaningful public consultation became the political norm. Political scientist B. Guy Peters (1996, 47) stated, "This is clearly an age in which government finds it difficult to legitimate its actions without active public involvement." Local democracy is now often equated with some form of participatory democracy, along with a healthy measure of self-governance. These developments have not been without consequences. Change can be difficult to effect, for example, if one group or another protests local decisions and pursues avenues of appeal through provincial or federal governing bodies. Competing voices seek to be heard in a multiplicity of forums, and new types of social media are facilitating this trend. Governance can best be conceptualized as a contested, contradictory process "constituted out of political struggle" (Laforest 2011, 14).

Despite these difficulties, civic engagement is a vital tool in the pursuit of sustainable cities. As noted by Niki Frantzeskaki and colleagues (2018, 281–82), civil society has long performed an essential role in advocating for more sustainable practices. They argue that a heterogeneity of interests – including NGOs, community groups, and various associations and networks – can play an important part in fostering innovative transitions toward sustainability. Moreover, such transitions require "deep radical change ... in ways of thinking, doing, and organizing ... as well as in ways of knowing and relating" (282), which is difficult to achieve within formal institutions. No doubt, members of civil society can just as readily hamper progress toward sustainability. They might, for instance, react against multi-density zoning changes

in their neighbourhoods, local efforts at socially inclusive policies, or the introduction of bicycle lanes that inhibit on-street parking. Nevertheless, without the concerted efforts of community groups to lobby governments, speak to media, and conduct campaigns, much of the progress toward healthier communities would not have taken place.

GOVERNMENT OR INTERACTIVE GOVERNANCE?

A widespread normative assumption in academic and popular literature is that local decision making for sustainability requires the active and meaningful participation of members of civil society, nongovernmental actors, and private-sector interests. Urban analysts of the changing political environment suggest that local governments constitute only one set of many influential actors that shape cities. In fact, although many people think of local government primarily in terms of city hall, it encompasses a much wider field of actors and entities, such as school boards, library boards, and health boards – entities that are active players in local governance yet legally independent or at arm's length from the local government in many jurisdictions. But the notion of governance goes beyond the more limiting notions of local *government.* As political scientist Zack Taylor (2019, 8) elaborates,

> I understand urban governance to involve governments and nongovernmental actors at all levels – federal, provincial or state, and local – as they shape the development of cities. Instead of viewing national or provincial governments as forces external to the city, my approach views local government as but one type of actor in a broader field of urban governance.

The concept of governance also recognizes the political influence of nonstate actors, including the private sector and civil society, but it does so in a context that can accommodate the recognition of variables like diversity, complexity, dynamics, and scale. Jan Kooiman and Maarten Bavinck (2013, 9) point out that these major variables influence "the governability of societal systems and their three components: a system-to-be-governed, a governing system and a system of governing interactions mediating between the two." Considerations include social concerns, such as poverty, health, and social justice, as well as physical concerns, such as climate change and other environmental issues. The term "interactive governance" acknowledges the important role that formal institutions play in governance and emphasizes the interactions between political actors that create opportunity and "contribute to the tackling of societal problems" (11). Network or interactive governance, a trend seen in governance literature as a way to address complex problems, contains its own set of problems, including questions of transparency, cooptation of agendas and interest groups, and accountability (see Chapter 8).

SUSTAINABLE LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Emerging environmental imperatives are driving Canadian local governments to find creative, integrative solutions to address sustainability challenges. What is it that local governments seek to sustain? Sustainability is an elusive idea that requires the protection and enhancement of desirable social-ecological systems – the systems that connect humans and the environment (Berkes 2017). In other words, as Alastair W. Moore and colleagues (2018) suggest, social-ecological systems are "substantially concerned with space and place, providing concepts regarding interactions between spaces, e.g., ecosystems, environments, economic zones, the urban, etc., each with its own socially constructed meaning." But which systems specifically are to be sustained, and how is that to be achieved? Donella H. Meadows and Diana Wright (2008) explain that systems, at their most basic level, are comprised of elements, interconnections, and a purpose or function. These systems are interconnected both temporally (i.e., past, present, and future) and spatially (i.e., scaling outward and upward from the local to the global). Desirable sustainable social-ecological systems are frequently associated with notions of biophysical vitality, social justice, and economic sufficiency. The pursuit and definition of these concepts are debated and negotiated in international, domestic, and local political arenas. The sustainability of cities and the ecosystems on which

they depend rests a great deal on the ability of decision makers (from the local to the global) to take meaningful steps to address serious environmental issues.[3]

THE SOCIAL METABOLISM OF CITIES

One way to understand the systemic relationship between social systems and the biophysical systems that support them is through the concept of social metabolism. Social systems require a continuous flow of energy and materials from the biophysical environment to sustain themselves. Cities, for example, require the "colonization of nature," which has been defined as "purposive intervention into natural systems aimed at improving their utility for societal purposes" (Haberl et al. 2016a, l). Both social and biophysical systems are continually co-evolving. A quantitative analysis of how materials like energy, biomass, and water flow through a city can give decision makers crucial information about how to sustainably design urban systems. Material flows accounting, as it has come to be known, is now used throughout the world to provide information on resource extraction and use (Mayer et al. 2016, 218). Some of these material flows, such as food and packaging, quickly become waste, whereas the remainder – including the built infrastructure, machines, and other durable products – stay in the system longer, adding to the material stocks. When the "circulation integrity and availability of critical resources" are at risk (referred to as a metabolic risk), a desired social-ecological system might reach a tipping point where the system collapses (Singh et al. 2022, 4).

In the context of local governance, trade-offs are inevitably made between and within different systems and scales. Policy makers must determine which systems should be sustained and how. When it comes to urban transportation, for example, should the focus be on building a transit system, such as light rail, along the spine of a city to facilitate human mobility while minimizing environmental impact? Or should the focus be on human behaviours and interactions with environments as whole systems, where mobility is only one consideration among many? Other possibilities include encouraging less public mobility through a more decentralized city form or through the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), developing flexible, adaptive systems that can accommodate changes in human-environmental interactions, and planning cities using the model of a circular economy to reduce material flows. What are the temporal and spatial boundaries of the system to be sustained, and which political actors should or can have a determining role?

The concept of sustainability (or sustainable development) first garnered notable international political action in the late 1980s with the release of the watershed report *Our Common Future* by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), known as the Brundtland Commission. This report established the importance of creating governing strategies that recognize biophysical limits to industrial economic growth, and it connected social equity and justice to any successful strategies. Equity within and between generations and limits to growth have since become hallmarks of many sustainability initiatives. Canadian public servant and environmentalist Jim MacNeill was secretary-general of the World Commission on Environment and Development and lead author of *Our Common Future.* As the organization ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (2015, 10) posits, "Sustainable cities work towards an environmentally, socially, and economically healthy and resilient habitat for existing populations, without compromising the ability of future generations to experience the same."

RESILIENT CITIES

A concept that has achieved a measure of political salience is the resilient community or city. Resiliency concerns the question of how well a city can deal with a disruptive social or environmental event. Like "sustainability," the term "resiliency" is contested. Scientifically, "resilience" has been defined as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure" (B.H. Walker and Salt 2006, xiii). One conceptualization of resiliency suggests that complex self-organizing social-ecological systems move through four phases or adaptive cycles: rapid growth, conservation, release, and reorganization. If a system changes a great deal, it can cross a threshold and start behaving in different and sometimes unanticipated ways (Gunderson and Holling

2002; B.H. Walker and Salt 2006, 11, 31). It can lose its basic function and structure. The achievement or maintenance of desirable local social-ecological systems requires that effective governing institutions foster resilient systems that are sustainable into the future.

The resiliency of systems is determined by factors related to diversity, modularity, and tightness of feedbacks. Diversity refers to institutions, economies, responses to challenges, land use, and interactions between systems. Modularity, as opposed to highly connected systems, allows for parts of a system to self-organize in the event of a shock. For example, the global agri-food industry is a tightly coupled, unsustainable system and therefore vulnerable to collapse. It poses risks related to global public health (Waltner-Toews 2004), the global food supply (Clapp 2012), ecological biodiversity, and socio-economic stability. Alternatively, locally connected food systems based on a circular economy help to reduce these vulnerabilities (see Chapter 11). This consideration applies to other policy areas as well, including energy, transportation, and communications systems. They are also interrelated. For example, on July 8, 2022, one of Canada's three major telecommunications companies, Rogers Communications, experienced a widespread outage over the course of twenty-four hours, affecting more than 12 million subscribers. Significant disruptions were experienced across the country, including in banking and business services and in emergency, social, and health services. Modularity ensures tighter feedback signals so that system disruptions or threats can be more readily detected, regionally contained, and mitigated (Hopkins 2009, 57).

In the context of a community, George Francis (2016, 155) suggests that "resiliency refers to the ongoing ability of a community to work together, to identify its strengths and challenges, to mobilize its assets, and to work collectively to meet its needs. Municipalities are in the front line as first responders." ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (2019) states, "A 'Resilient City' is prepared to absorb and recover from any shock or stress while maintaining its essential functions, structures, and identity as well as adapting and thriving in the face of continual change. Building resilience requires identifying and assessing hazard risks, reducing vulnerability and exposure, and lastly, increasing resistance, adaptive capacity, and emergency preparedness."

If a municipality is to be resilient and to have the capacity to act effectively, normative factors need to be considered. For example, Patricia Romero-Lankao, Olga Wilhelmi, and Mikhail Chester (2018, 98) suggest that "urban resilience is related to normative and ethical principles such as the unequally distributed resources that individuals and organizations have (or potentially have) to effectively mitigate and adapt to the hazards and stresses they encounter." Social inequality, then, will affect the resiliency of a community if certain populations or areas of a system are left vulnerable and do not have the capacity to absorb or adapt to disturbances beyond a certain threshold.

There may be some general agreement on many goals, principles, practices, and strategies for fostering healthy communities. However, Canadian municipal approaches to sustainability are by no means uniform given their tremendous diversity and dispersion throughout a huge geographic territory. The densely populated city of Toronto has rivalled Chicago as the fourth largest in North America and one of the world's most culturally diverse cities. In contrast, the town of Trinity Bay in Newfoundland and Labrador has fewer than 100 people (Statistics Canada 2022a) and is located on the northern tip of a bay jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean. In addition to their population disparities, Canadian communities vary enormously in their forms of government, culture, economic base, and physical characteristics. Whether large or small, each one has a unique set of sustainability challenges determined by its context. Rural and remote municipalities, such as Trinity Bay, although not pressured by the social-environmental impacts of large populations, have their own sets of challenges (see Figure 1.1).

For example, large urban centres have access to many more resources and tools – human, fiscal, educational, and technological. Smaller local governments are severely constrained in their ability to address social-ecological problems, such as those caused by climate change, social inequity, high costs of living, sewerage, and limited economic opportunities. Transit systems, social and educational programs, housing, and conservation initiatives all require resources and

a fiscal base that small rural and remote communities do not possess. Remoteness from urban centres equipped with health and social programs deepens and extends sustainability challenges and social polarization (Walmsley and Kading 2018a). One study of environmental injustice has examined how Ontario rural communities have been called upon to play "host" to urban environmental agendas for renewable power, such as wind generation and the processing of waste from large urban centres (C. Walker, Mason, and Bednar 2018, 118). The risks and costs to the rural areas are perceived to far outweigh the benefits (120). Examples of this kind underline the need for a place-based governance approach that recognizes the specific needs of each community (see Chapter 8). Unique policy outcomes are generated by the interplay of factors such as climate change, geography, history, demographics, planning, economics, design, and political culture. Unlike their counterparts in Prince George, British Columbia, for example, waste management officials in Windsor, Ontario, need not consider how to deal with black bears that have acquired a taste for urban cuisine. Rather, they have a whole different set of context-related factors to consider.

Global issues like climate change also call into play diverse strategies as municipalities cope with extreme weather events that can lead to record levels of flooding, forest fires, hurricanes, drought, or ice melt. Given this reality, it is worthwhile emphasizing that place matters and that there are inevitable trade-offs involved in each community when considering which valued system components should be sustained, who should participate in making decisions, what kinds of decisions are needed, and how decisions will be reached. That is why it is imperative to learn about the governing institutions and processes that determine these decisions.

Historically, local governments have been organized along formal, institutional, and hierarchical bureaucratic lines. Today, however, much of the sustainability literature as well as many local political strategies call for more networked, collaborative, horizontal approaches to decision making – ones that reach beyond the auspices of local government institutions. A local governance approach recognizes that although municipal governments play a key role in shaping local communities, they constitute only one set of politically influential actors. Ann Dale, William T. Dushenko, and Pamela Robinson (2012, 4) suggest that the pursuit of sustainability is a process of reconciliation among three imperatives: "the ecological imperative to ensure global biophysical carrying capacity for the future, the social imperative to ensure the development of culturally sustainable systems of governance, and the economic imperative to ensure a viable standard of living for all." For such a reconciliation to occur, these scholars call for nothing less than an institutional transformation. They are not alone. Commonly shared views about the actions needed for the pursuit of sustainability have emerged from a diversity of fields. Box 1.1 outlines these

1.1 Trinity Bay, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2022 | Courtesy of Tanya Markvart, tanyamarkvart.com

BOX 1.1 Key elements of local governing strategies for sustainability

Requisite characteristics of, and approaches by, municipal governments when transitioning toward sustainability include:

- embracing a sustainability ethic based on criteria that will guide decision making (R.B. Gibson 2013, 2017) and possessing the agency, capacity, and political will to apply this ethic to governance and community decision making (Evans et al. 2006; Bulkeley et al. 2018; Romero-Lankao, Wilhelmi, and Chester 2018)
- adopting the seven main characteristics of good governance identified by the United Nations Global Campaign on Urban Good Governance, launched in 2002: sustainability, subsidiarity, equity, efficiency, transparency and accountability, civic engagement and citizenship, and security (UN-Habitat 2002; see also Tindal et al. 2017 and Z. Taylor 2016)
- employing place-based strategies that recognize the inextricable relationship between the social and physical environment (Dale, Dushenko, and P. Robinson 2012; R.B. Gibson 2013; Singh et al. 2013; Armitage, Charles, and Berkes 2017; A.W. Moore et al. 2018; N.J. Bennett et al. 2019)
- creating and collaborating in governing processes that have a good fit with the spatial and temporal scales of valued ecosystems, accounting for the dynamics and functioning of these ecosystems' processes (Daly 1996; Ekstrom and Young 2009; Leman Stefanovic and Scharper 2012; Wittmer and Gundimeda 2012; Loucks et al. 2017)
- implementing more comprehensive measures to identify and assess the community's well-being and to value its natural and social assets, as well as its economy (Canadian Index of Wellbeing n.d.; Sen 1985; Robeyns and Byskov 2020)
- possessing a capability to learn, collaborate, innovate, adapt, and engage in transitional and long-term thinking (Kelly and Adger 2000; R.B. Gibson and Hassan 2005; Smit and Wandel 2006; Armitage, Berkes, and Doubleday 2007; Blackmore 2010; Abernethy 2014; Francis 2016; Bai et al. 2018; Castán Broto et al. 2019).

Note: The accompanying names of analysts who discuss these considerations constitute only a small subset of a large group of sustainability scholars in Canada and elsewhere.

themes. They arise throughout this text in the discussion of local efforts toward sustainability.

As noted above, governing trade-offs must be made between competing priorities, and sustainability efforts will vary in response to local circumstances. Although there are commonly shared themes, one can envision municipalities taking many different approaches to sustainable cities, depending on the emphasis. As a result, an ethic comprised of a set of sustainability criteria is needed in order to guide local decision makers if they are to avoid substantive trade-offs that will lead to serious adverse impacts. One well-known approach, pioneered in Canada and tested in a number of communities, has been developed by Robert Gibson (2013, 3), whose "overlapping and interacting" core criteria include "long-term social-ecological system integrity; livelihood sufficiency and opportunity for everyone; intragenerational equity; intergenerational equity; resource maintenance and efficiency; social-ecological civility and democratic governance; precaution and adaptation; and immediate and long-term integration." Trade-offs between these principles are inevitable and context-dependent. For governing decisions to be considered legitimate by the public, the trade-offs made by governments require informed, publicly inclusive discussions to ensure transparency and an awareness of their implications for the community's long-term sustainability.

Converting agendas into action requires political will, agency, and capacity as well as biophysical, human, and financial resources. Moreover, the complex, interconnected mix of factors and actors that characterize contemporary decision-making arenas call for inclusive political processes to facilitate social and institutional

learning, a critical reflexivity, self-organization, adaptation, and anticipatory action when needed.

ADAPTATION, TRANSFORMATION, AND LEARNING

Incremental change is built into liberal-democratic governance systems. Typical examples of tools frequently wielded in the name of environmental protection include a variety of technological solutions, environmental legislation and taxation, ecological land-use planning, social and community health, and public education programs. Many, if not most, students of sustainability believe that the incremental steps taken within the current liberal-capitalist growth paradigm are insufficient in terms of reversing or halting the unsustainable trajectory in this era of the Anthropocene. A transformation of existing societal and institutional values, assumptions, and approaches is required to reverse the current adverse trends. Some observers go further in their prognostications, arguing that it is necessary to explore how societies might deal with what they view as an inevitable degree of collapse in valued social and ecological systems (Jacobs 2005; Tainter 2011; Quilley 2017; Bendell 2018). As James Howard Kunstler (2009, 15) notes, "We face a dire and unprecedented period of difficulty." This future scenario is characterized by a severe drop in health and wellness and in human civility, as well as by a great degree of strife. A casual perusal of recent headlines in mainstream journals confirms such prognoses. So where do we go from here?

One possible future scenario has been presented by the well-known Transition Towns movement, which envisions a post-carbon future based on relocalization and community initiatives. In Canada, this movement seems to have evolved into complementary local efforts under other banners promoting local food production, renewable energy, or circular economy initiatives. The literature is replete with analyses and prescriptions for avoiding or mitigating adverse environmental impacts of anthropogenic (or human-caused) activities and for developing strategies to tackle climate change adaptation and post-carbon futures. These analyses have generated a substantial body of literature on transitions toward sustainability (Romero-Lankao, Frantzeskaki, and Griffith 2018). According to Sarah Burch and colleagues (2018, 307), "Explorations of governance in the transitions literature seek to overcome the failures that have emerged from rigid, hierarchical, fragmented, conventional, top-down, government-centric approaches by moving towards systems-based, flexible, and participatory strategies that foster social learning through governance."

Daunting barriers stand in the way of cities attempting to pursue sustainability initiatives. One of the most persistent is that known as path-dependent institutional behaviour, whereby the practices of the past are systemically ingrained into the present and frequently left unquestioned. How very common it is to hear "But that is not the way it is done" in meetings at city hall when decision makers are confronted with a recommended change to existing processes, plans, or policies. As John S. Dryzek (2014, 941) observes,

> Path dependency means that early decisions constrain later ones; as the costs of changing course become high, actors develop material stakes in stable institutions, and institutions arrange feedback that reinforces their own necessity (consider, for example, how market institutions punish policy deviations from market orthodoxy). The ideas and norms generated by an institution's operation can further solidify the path. What all this means is that an established institution may constrain possibilities for future choice across institutions by its mere presence.

It follows that if existing processes are not working, governments need to question their very foundations (Dryzek and Pickering 2017). Reflexivity is required, which sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984, 3) has asserted is "grounded in the continuous monitoring of action which human beings display and expect others to display" (see also Meuleman 2018). Reflexivity has been defined as "the ability of a structure, process or set of ideas to reconfigure its response to reflection on its performance" (Dryzek and Pickering 2017, 353). An important tool in the reflective process is deliberative democracy, where "collective reasoning" takes place and an appreciation for long-term sustainability can be fostered (354). Discussions facilitate a process of collective and ongoing social

learning. The notion of "reflection-in-action" is seen as a new response to a situation, often in conditions of uncertainty that can lead to "on-the-spot" experimentation (Schön 1995, 247). Institutional learning and reflection are considered by many analysts to be an essential component in transitions toward sustainability (see Chapter 15).

CONSTRAINTS AND POSSIBILITIES

It is important to emphasize here that some of the local initiatives mentioned in this book may be limited in scope and impact. One of the goals here, however, is to share ideas about what has been tried in various Canadian municipalities so that they can learn from each other and possibly adopt similar initiatives while adapting them to their own specific needs. Local governments require the capacity and the opportunities to experiment and to act as incubators for innovation (Hancock 2016; Torfing 2019). There is no question that the ability to pursue innovative sustainability strategies might be (and frequently is) constrained by a number of factors, many of which interact with and reinforce each other in positive feedback loops, from the global level right down to local institutions.

Throughout the world, including Canada, dominant political and economic forces, facilitated by global capitalism and associated ideologies and structures, encourage the concentration of wealth, resources, and power in the hands of ever fewer individuals and corporations. Western political institutional structures are informed by notions of economic liberalism that are based on the tenets of individualism and private property. One outcome has been unsustainable material growth powered by a fossil-fuelled economy. Tightly coupled economic and biophysical systems, operating at different temporal and spatial scales, are undermining diversity, modularity, redundancy, and resiliency in social-ecological systems. These trends are spurred on by highly integrated information and communications systems. Powerful private communications conglomerates wield immense power over both medium and message (see Chapter 10). Growing social polarization and inequality have further aggravated ecological degradation, which is concentrated in geographic areas where people have the fewest resources and limited political influence. The world is now experiencing mass human migrations as a result of anthropogenic activities, whether they be a result of war, climate change, or extreme poverty (see Chapter 9). Recent years have also seen a growing global movement of reactionary populism against the perceived privileges of liberal elites (and their progressive agendas, such as environmentalism). This movement provides fertile ground for the formation and institution of populist, authoritarian, leader-dominated governments that threaten liberal-democratic representative institutions. Reactionary (or right-wing) populism is both a factor in and a manifestation of growing societal polarization, ethnic discrimination, and inequality.

In Canada, the national government shares political authority with the provincial and territorial governments. Local governments fall under the constitutional jurisdiction of the provinces and territories, although some aspects of local government are also considered a federal responsibility (see Chapter 3). As a result, local governments are subject to the will of senior governments, most notably the provinces and territories. Because of actions taken by senior governments, local governments have frequently been restrained in their ability to represent their communities. Numerous examples can be offered from across the country, including municipal amalgamations that reduce council sizes, limiting democratic representation; provincial planning laws that override municipal decision-making processes; legislation that changes electoral processes or the role of elected representatives; and infrastructural development that bulldozes local environmental initiatives. Provincial and local political agendas are also influenced by electoral cycles that favour more immediate and tangible displays of public spending (e.g., the construction of new infrastructure and buildings) over complex, less visible, and longer-term initiatives aimed at sustaining valued ecosystems.

Within local governments themselves, initiatives toward sustainability are often resisted by the path-dependent behaviours of elected incumbents or municipal staff. Path-dependent behaviour refers to the predisposition to maintain the rules, norms, conduct, and procedures of the past. Incentives to change

existing practices toward sustainability may be outweighed by the perceived benefit of maintaining the status quo, which has served decision makers well in the past. This resistance to change is also present in the wider community. Single-home ratepayers often push back against neighbourhood changes like the densification of residential areas and the introduction of multi-family dwellings. This phenomenon is known as NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) syndrome. Although Canada has a multicultural society, the composition of its elected local government bodies does not represent its cultural and social diversity. Such diversity can promote social innovation and problem solving, as well as representative and participatory forms of democracy. In addition, there is still a privileging of solutions that are driven primarily by scientific, expert, and technological knowledge, to the exclusion of other types of knowledge and learning in decision making. Technology and science have an important role to play in fostering sustainability but only as part of a policy-making toolkit. Governments also often resort to path-dependent behaviours when they are called upon to immediately respond to social and physical crises.

Social and environmental crises are on the rise as a result of "wicked" challenges such as climate change, the growth of homelessness, epidemics and pandemics, mass human migrations as a result of war, and environmental disasters. Crisis decision making generates reactive, rather than proactive, governing practices that, in turn, limit the ability of governments to engage in long-term planning. In addition, municipalities rely on sources of revenue that depend heavily on property development and its associated uses. This dependency presents a notable dilemma when trying to sustain valued ecosystems. The problem is worsened by the ongoing privatization of land and the loss of public commons, as well as by the associated loss of social and biophysical diversity. Local decisions are typically based on conventional forms of valuation, such as GDP, rather than on more nuanced forms of assessments using indicators of societal and biophysical well-being. The above list is not complete, but it does illustrate the enormity of the sustainability challenges ahead. These limitations are acknowledged here and referred to throughout this book in order to ground the discussion in the current realities of governing in this complex era.

Despite these significant barriers to change, local governments are taking tangible steps toward sustainability across Canada. These efforts are well worth exploring for the lessons and opportunities that they offer. But which ones are likely to take hold as opposed to those that fall by the wayside? For an observer of municipal government, attempts to determine which ones will succeed in becoming long-term sustainable efforts and which ones will not are often exercises in clairvoyance. It is not easy to discern what program will have traction over the long term as opposed to being a short-lived ephemeral experiment. However, as discussed below, certain characteristics might indicate which initiatives are most likely to be successful. And here, the term "successful" is used only to denote widespread salience on public and private agendas that can lead to their implementation and staying power. It is not intended to imply that they are necessarily the ideal or preferred answer to any sustainability problems.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF "SUCCESSFUL" SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

Legal and Institutional Support

Initiatives that have legal support through legislation and regulations will tend to see initiatives take root, grow, and possibly be disseminated. The banning of the use of cosmetic pesticides on lawns is one well-known example that had its roots in a court case pitting a municipality against a pesticide company, and over time the ban spread throughout Canada (see Chapter 3). Other examples include environmental-protection legislation, public consultation on municipal-planning legislation, and various pieces of human rights legislation that affect the shape of cities.

Political Will, Leadership, and Commitment

Across the country, in Canadian cities large and small, one can find numerous examples of environmental innovations that came about as a result of the dedication and leadership of elected representatives and city staff who had a vision to foster a more sustainable municipality. Over the past couple of decades, some

mayors in Canada's three largest cities and provinces – notably David Miller of Toronto, Gregor Robertson of Vancouver, and Valérie Plante of Montreal – have championed the cause of a sustainable city and have also played related leadership roles in the international arena (see Chapter 9).

Multi-level Government Support

Programs that have traction and engender the commitment of financial and human resources by senior governments are those that have a widespread impact on people and become a major issue of concern to voters. Initiatives that align with goals agreed to by political leaders in international forums, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations General Assembly 2015) (see Figure 9.2), will also garner support from receptive governments. At the time of writing, some major issues of concern include housing, health care, climate change, cost of living, and education. One municipal partnership scheme that has received federal funding is the Circular Cities and Regions Initiative, whose participants include twenty-five communities across Canada. This scheme was created through a partnership between the National Zero Waste Council, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, RECYC-QUÉBEC, and the Recycling Council of Alberta (see Chapter 12). Another initiative is the Low Carbon Cities Canada (LC3) network, a federally endowed partnership of seven of Canada's largest cities and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (see Chapter 7). However, given the provincial authority over municipalities, supportive provincial legislative and regulatory frameworks are important ingredients in successful multi-level, polycentric arrangements. In Canada, the work of senior-level governments in support of polycentric arrangements is often uneven and inconsistent. Much depends on the political agendas of the day.

Extensive Political and Administrative Collaboration

The partnerships that local governments forge with regional governments and with other political communities of interest are often the result of collaborative, polycentric governance efforts. Through formal and informal partnerships and communications, networking can lead to the long-term viability of an initiative. Well-established, decentralized, networked organizations also have some built-in redundancies that allow them to remain viable. If one member of the network falters or if one funding source dries up, there are other possibilities still available. Long-term sustainable outcomes are maximized when participants from many communities of interest pool human and financial resources and engage in knowledge sharing (see Chapters 6 and 7).

Media Attention and Promotion by Influential Interest Groups

The ability of citizen activists to capture media attention and to gain the financial support of well-established interest groups can help citizens to successfully pressure governments into making policy changes and can shift the public discourse toward a focus on specific areas of concern. Examples include movements protesting climate change, environmental contamination, or racial discrimination and other forms of social injustice (see Chapters 2 and 13). It is important to remember that public protests are not necessarily organized to advance causes related to social or ecological sustainability. Throughout history, protest movements and the media have also been used to prevent changes to the status quo, as vividly highlighted by the surge in recent years of reactionary populism around the world, including in Canada.

A Successful Urban Experiment That Is Then Diffused to Other Communities

One of the advantages of decentralized government and other forms of distributed decision making is that it is possible to innovate and experiment with new ideas and policies from which others can learn. If an initiative is instigated by a municipality and does not lead to a desired result, the impact is contained. Alternatively, an innovation tried in one place can be adapted and emulated elsewhere. Numerous cases abound, including the banning of pesticides (mentioned above), active transportation initiatives, community gardens, universal-planning design, public

consultation, the use of information and communications technologies to foster e-democracy, and energy and water conservation. Some of these experiments are inevitably going to be short-lived and deemed unsuccessful, but lessons can be learned from these efforts. It should also be noted that even these initiatives, instead of necessarily failing, may have evolved over time, leading to new projects, or they may have been merged with others under a new name to better suit the needs of local participants (see Part 3).

A Crisis or Major Disruption in the Status Quo

A serious disruption to a community may lead to significant changes in politics and the shape of a city. Major disasters that disrupt the status quo can allow for a reconsideration of past practices and can make room for new approaches and designs. Such is the case with natural disasters, which can lead to new emergency management policies, as well as result in the adoption of leading-edge approaches to the physical rebuilding of a community. The COVID-19 pandemic also generated some innovations. For example, throughout the world, including in Canada, when normal traffic patterns were disrupted by the policies implemented to manage the outbreak, active transportation became a policy focus (Nikitas et al. 2021). Conversely, these major disruptions also allow for the possibility that more centralist, authoritarian, or reactionary forces may step in and take over in times of emergency, posing threats to local democracy.

Social-Technical Innovations for Efficiency and Conservation

Environmental or social innovations that do not disrupt existing ideological belief systems or threaten dominant political or private interests are more likely to gain traction. Examples are companies certified as B Corporations or those operating within the context of liberal-capitalist norms while reducing their environmental footprint (see Chapter 14). Social-technical approaches also fit this classification. These efforts apply technological solutions and pricing incentives to encourage energy or water conservation. They are becoming widespread and are often delivered through private-public partnerships or through green-economy approaches that can benefit business and governments that are attempting to conserve valued environmental goods and services (see Chapter 12). Another example is the development of more efficient forms of public transit with the purported benefits of reducing travel time for commuters and alleviating traffic congestion (see Chapter 12).

In sum, the most readily adopted and implemented changes directed toward sustainability are those that have some combination of certain characteristics: they are easily introduced, readily understood, and have widespread benefits; they are promoted by political champions; they have extensive networks or partners; they garner significant support from senior governments in terms of policy, resources, and funding; and/or they are implemented without major disturbances to existing dominant socio-economic and political systems and practices. However, given the state of serious global threats to sustainability, it may very well be that nothing less than holistic transformations in ideology, culture, practices, and institutions will suffice. Yet changes of such disruptive magnitude could lead to unanticipated, cascading, or undesirable outcomes for other systems. In short, this is an era of wicked problems.

WICKED PROBLEMS AND INSTITUTIONAL PRESCRIPTIONS

For those tutored in formal institutional analysis, it is tempting to search for legal and formal structural solutions, such as bestowing more legal authority and resources on local governments so that they can get on with the job of fostering healthier, more sustainable cities. To be sure, one can readily find numerous examples of how local authorities have been severely hampered by senior governments in delivering much-needed action that would advance these objectives. If municipalities had more capacity to self-govern, it would be easier to facilitate change at this level of governance. But the devolution of authority (accompanied by additional resources) is insufficient to effect the transformative changes needed. Complex, wicked social-ecological challenges are not resolvable through

mere institutional tinkering or by local governments acting alone.

The concept of a wicked problem was first framed in the late 1960s by Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber (1972), and it was further developed in social planning by C. West Churchman (1967). Recently, the term has been widely used in the context of complex issues such as climate change, natural disasters, and pandemics. Brian W. Head and John Alford (2015, 712) suggest that wicked problems are those considered to be "complex, unpredictable, open ended, or intractable" since they are resistant to solutions. Furthermore, a wicked problem is "associated with social pluralism (multiple interests and values of stakeholders), institutional complexity (the context of interorganizational cooperation and multilevel governance), and scientific uncertainty (fragmentation and gaps in reliable knowledge)" (716). In a governing context, wicked problems tend to cross institutional and ecological boundaries. New collaborative governing models operating at different temporal and spatial scales are emerging to respond to the challenges posed by wicked problems.

Dryzek (2014, 952), like others, acknowledges that although dominant governments can be "highly problematic ... haste to institutional prescription is also problematic, threatening to short-circuit the kind of learning process necessary in the novel and complex conditions accompanying the challenge of the Anthropocene." Moreover, one cannot assume that institutional prescription will be effective without factoring in temporal and spatial considerations. Scale is important. As noted above, the transformation toward sustainability is not achievable at one level of governance. It is not possible without supportive action on a larger scale that includes polycentric, multilevel, and place-based governance (see Chapters 6, 7, and 8). As Fikret Berkes (2017, 1) explains, "Social (human) and ecological (biophysical) systems are linked by mutual feedbacks, and are interdependent and co-evolutionary." The mechanistic institutional-structural constructs that are typically associated with public administration and city government do not align with conceptual lenses that require complex, adaptive social-ecological systems thinking. Transformative sustainability is not something that local governments were originally structured to achieve given their provenance in principles of order, stability, service delivery, and economic development.

Nevertheless, forms of urban autonomy can be achieved in a variety of ways, as noted by Harriet Bulkeley and colleagues (2018, 706): "Critically, autonomy is neither a one-dimensional property of the organisation of the state (in political, administrative or financial terms) nor an attribute that can be readily conferred on a particular territory or form of society; rather, autonomy is a multifaceted political project, achieved relationally and as such subject to political change." Going beyond the formal powers of city authorities, urban autonomy might be most helpfully conceptualized in terms of operating within a system of collaborative governance where other actors and factors figure into the mix. Bulkeley and colleagues suggest that this collaboration should include non-governmental actors, take into account social processes, and involve city decision makers working together to create new political spaces. They note that "inevitably autonomy, as a political project, must involve significant challenges of addressing social and environmental justice, both internally and in relation to wider global concerns" (717).

CONCLUSION: LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN TRANSITION

> *New forms of civic leadership are emerging in cities across the country – leadership that emphasizes longer-term holistic community visions, multi-sectoral collaboration, and civic engagement. Under this evolving reality, urban and community change is reframed as an iterative process of learning-by-doing through experimentation, reflection, and innovation.*
>
> – Bradford and Baldwin 2018, 19

A transformation toward sustainability and the low-carbon future that is needed to avoid serious climate change impacts can be instigated at many scales and levels of governance and in various forums. Some analysts refer to transition experiments. Daniel

Rosenbloom and colleagues (2018, 370) define such experiments as "deliberate interventions that explicitly test a novel configuration of social and technical elements (e.g., new partnerships of actors, emerging practices and technologies, and novel applications) that could lead to substantial low-carbon change in energy systems." They argue that these types of experiments foster social learning about change among actors to "improve and scale up possible responses to climate change" and to build capacity among innovators while reducing risk during the process and promoting citizen engagement and education (371).

Although these experiments can take place at different scales, the temporal and spatial context in which they occur will affect outcome – a fact that underlines the important role of local governance. In contrast to the higher orders of governance, the local scale is where public participation appears to be most robust and where there is a history of local civic engagement in areas such as urban planning and renewal (Guay and Hamel 2014, 167). Neighbourhoods are where the costs and benefits of a policy decision might be most immediately visible (167). Fires, floods, environmental contamination, poverty, and social injustice are most directly felt where people live their daily lives.

It is also at this scale that initiatives can be more readily introduced and attempted. Along with transition experiments, another emerging practice is the "urban living lab," which is frequently included in the toolbox of the people working toward sustainability transitions. An urban living lab has been defined as "a local place for innovative solutions that aims to solve urban challenges and contribute to long-term sustainability by actively and openly co-constructing solutions with citizens and other stakeholders" (Chronéer, Ståhlbröst, and Habibipour 2019, 60). The broader term "living labs" often refers to initiatives that foster innovation through the collaborative development and application of new ICTs in order to create smart cities. For the purposes of this book, the term "urban living labs" refers to initiatives built on a sustainable model of governance and focused on social-technical, long-term sustainable solutions that are "bounded to a place where local issues in the urban area can be experimented with while contributing to global challenges" (60). These urban living labs are springing up in cities around the world, including in Canada.

Local politics is an integral component in these urban sustainability experiments or labs. Capacity and political will constitute key ingredients in any transitional efforts. It is in this context that the importance of a place-focused politics comes to the fore, nurturing social and civic learning and democracy. Patsy Healey (2018, 65) argues that place matters to people and that civic discussions about valued places can create "a public value" within a community of citizens. In the process of considering how a place should be perceived and interacted with, people enter into discussions, seek common ground, and learn what it is to be part of a political community. As Healey concludes,

> Whether a place-focused politics develops around a neighbourhood or a city or a region or a wider territory which gets called up through political processes of recognition, it thus needs to be continually challenged to pay attention to its wider relations as well as its internal dynamics. The civil sphere of a place-focused political community thus interacts with and needs to be infused by membership of other political communities and civil spheres, including at the scale of a national political community. As many now argue, vigorous debate within multiple, overlapping civil spheres can make a difference by mobilising knowledge about these relations and dynamics, rights and responsibilities, in all kinds of dimensions, opening possibilities and honing political programmes and specific actions by energetic critique. (76)

The possibilities are there. It is important to be cognizant of the immensity of the social-ecological problems that we are collectively facing. At the same time, however, we must consider the ways that it is possible to move forward. And in this critical task, local governments have an important part to play, notwithstanding the many barriers along the way. Local governments were founded on notions of order and

stability, service delivery, efficiency, public well-being, prosperity, and democracy. These goals still form the bases of their mandates, but today the ongoing subject of keen debate is how best to define and operationalize these goals in a way that helps to sustain communities and the systems on which they depend into the future.

NOTES

1 Zoning is a planning tool used to partition land in order to separate incompatible land uses.
2 Entropy refers to the dissipated, irreversible flow of energy – the second law of thermodynamics.
3 In this book, "environment" is used to refer to interconnected social and biophysical systems.

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