

**Tales of Two Cities: Women and Municipal
Restructuring in London and Toronto****

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Introduction

My recently published book on citizenship patterns in Toronto and London is built around an unusual meshing of conceptual and empirical streams of enquiry.¹ At one level, it grapples with theories of citizenship, which ask how citizens of contemporary democracies engage and feel a sense of belonging to their polities and larger societies. Boldly stated, is democratic citizenship possible in cities, and can it be robust and buoyant, in an age of state restructuring and economic globalization?

As is often the case, observers diverge in their responses to this question. Some believe the fallout from integrative pressures directly threatens urban citizenship. In their view, as markets surge and states retrench, civil society interests become marginalized by a hollowing out of traditional channels of public engagement. Others maintain that as opportunities narrow for citizen engagement at international and national levels, contemporary cities offer welcoming spaces for social mobilization. From their perspective, the same integrative processes that weaken nation-states can enhance local democracy.

Very little empirical research exists in the area. The larger project of which this paper forms a part is among the first to ask how disparate experiments in municipal restructuring in London and Toronto shaped civic engagement. The analysis employs the lens of citizenship theory to assess three dimensions of representation for a diverse category of citizens, urban women; each lens follows from an identifiable way of thinking about political and social participation. First, the book examines office-holding on municipal councils as an indicator of liberal political representation. Second, it explores the development of municipal femocracies as a measure of difference representation. Third, the discussion evaluates official spatial planning texts in order to reveal a discursive dimension of representation that emerges from post-structural approaches.

The study finds intriguing variations both between and within cities. Comparisons of women's representation along liberal, difference and discursive dimensions showed consistently more robust patterns in post-GLA London than post-amalgamation Toronto. The election of at least 40 percent women to the Greater London Assembly since its creation in 2000, the existence of an effective strategic femocracy in the Greater London Authority, and the attention paid to women's lived experiences of urban space in the text of the first GLA official plan contrasted with lower levels of elected representation, no visible femocracy and no mention of women in the first megacity plan.

So What?

What broader conclusions can be drawn from comparative research on London and Toronto?

By demonstrating systematic cross-city variations, these results suggested institutional and political leadership conditions in post-GLA London were more conducive to meaningful urban citizenship than those in post-amalgamation

Toronto. At the same time, they disconfirmed expectations following from the globalization literature that municipal representation would be uniformly weak in both places or, alternately, that cities would consistently offer welcoming spaces in a globalizing era. Neither the thesis that urban citizenship was eroded and endangered in a fairly standardized way by economic integration pressures, nor the argument that it was protected and buoyant because of opportunities for collective action provided by cities, captured the range of variation we found in contemporary London and Toronto -- where the vitality of women's citizenship diverged markedly along all three indicators. Moreover, arguments that representation would be weaker in London due to the entrenchment of new public management approaches and radical social movement traditions were not sustained; neither were claims that citizenship in Toronto would be advantaged by the city's relative newness, the presence of federal structures and pragmatic traditions of social movement organization in Canada.

Overall, representation as captured in this study was neither invariably weak nor consistently strong across two cities that underwent major political restructuring. Instead, the varied institutional arrangements set in place as part of the reconfiguration process, including electoral and bureaucratic schemes, together with the divergent political values of central governments and mayors who led London and Toronto through these major transformations, created disparate contexts for the evolution of urban citizenship. For example, the presence of relatively progressive leaders at central government and municipal levels in London in 1997 and following clearly contrasted with conservative governors in Toronto during this same period. The former provided a measurably better representational environment than the latter, since left-of-centre politicians at both levels in London seemed more willing to open up electoral, bureaucratic and planning processes in ways that enhanced citizen engagement than their right-of-centre comparators in Toronto.

This conclusion stands out not only because institutional and leadership factors seemed to shape all three dimensions of women's representation, but because they apparently did so quite rapidly – in both London and Toronto, within a few years of their official restructuring dates. We can report first, that institutional and leadership variations matter for contemporary urban citizenship, in ways that resonated through electoral, bureaucratic and spatial planning channels in both post-GLA London and megacity Toronto. Second, structures and leaders can exert meaningful effects within a short time frame, and certainly within the first few years of municipal reconfiguration. Third, if we were to construct a governance continuum extending from best to worst case conditions, using these two cases only, it would stretch from GLA arrangements under Ken Livingstone to amalgamated Toronto under Mel Lastman.

Overall, these conclusions suggest that even though the institutional and leadership circumstances of the early GLA years were far from nirvana, they remained considerably more promising than those of megacity Toronto. Although Tony Blair's New Labour central government was enamoured of efficiency and competitiveness criteria, it was also committed to decentralizing decision-making and enhancing social cohesion in the wake of the Thatcher/Major years. At a

rhetorical level, New Labour talk about restoring local democracy offered important openings for politicians like Ken Livingstone, who pressed the central government to make good on campaign promises of political and social renewal. In particular, Livingstone used his mandate as London's first popularly elected mayor to push back against jurisdictional and fiscal constraints imposed by the central government, thus directly testing Blair's commitment to local autonomy.

By way of contrast, Toronto's municipal leadership from 1998 through 2003 was effectively allied with a right-wing provincial Conservative regime. As the first megacity mayor, Mel Lastman implemented his promise to freeze property tax rates and thus tie the hands of downtown spendthrifts, all in the name of eliminating waste and duplication. Once Toronto assumed greater responsibility for extensive redistributive programs under the terms of a central government disentanglement exercise, but won no commensurate increase in fiscal resources or institutional autonomy, Lastman turned on his former Queen's Park allies. Yet the first mayor of amalgamated Toronto lacked credibility by this point. Central government elites who had imposed institutional change in the first place refused to compromise, while Toronto's weakened mayor demonstrated limited capacity to push back at any level.

This account of urban restructuring in London and Toronto sharply underlines the importance of inter-governmental relations, and especially the preferences and intentions of senior levels of government. In London, New Labour's rhetoric about reforming municipal governance was grounded in norms that emphasized the renewal of local democracy, even though the actual practice of nominating an official party candidate to run for the mayoralty in 2000 and then ceding control to the new coordinating authority revealed profound reluctance and, indeed, contradictions on this score. As GLA mayor, Ken Livingstone understood these tensions and made it clear that he was prepared to maximize the fiscal, jurisdictional and discursive powers of his "strong mayor" position.

In Toronto, provincial Conservative efforts to impose private sector norms as part of a larger reconfiguration of urban government were assisted by the absence of an effective, oppositional mayor. Efforts by the central government at Queen's Park to alter public norms and rhetoric in the direction of greater efficiency and marketization went largely unchallenged at Toronto City Hall – a pattern that held important consequences for Canada's largest city. The ascent of hard right preferences effectively obscured the fundamental citizenship work performed by municipalities and their leaders; underlying values about citizen engagement, social equality and the role of local governments in teaching democratic practice at the community level were washed away in the Lastman administration's rush to try to balance budgets in the wake of amalgamation, downloading and a municipal tax freeze.

Our examination of London and Toronto also reveals intriguing trends over time within each city. Longitudinal data showed women's representation in bureaucratic and spatial planning terms declined between the late GLC and early GLA years in London, and between the late City of Toronto and early megacity periods in Toronto. On the liberal citizenship measure, election to municipal councils, we found a significant increase in proportions of women from the late

GLC to early GLA era, and a slight decline or plateau from pre-amalgamation Metro council to initial megacity council figures.

Data on two of the three empirical yardsticks we used, the bureaucratic and spatial plan measures, could be interpreted as support for globalization arguments that integrative and competitive pressures on cities caused the quality of urban citizenship to decline over time. Yet this view may gloss over more than it illuminates; that is, the thesis fails to consider how unusually robust femocracy and representative planning discourse were in late GLC London, and still remained visible in post-GLA London, as well as the extent to which both phenomena were quite modest even at their height in pre-amalgamation downtown Toronto, and became virtually extinct under the megacity arrangement. In short, we need to bear these divergent thresholds in mind when asserting longitudinal change, since the details of pre- and post-restructuring municipal feminism and official plans differed dramatically between the two cities.

Challenging the Literature

A variety of challenges to our understandings of cities and citizenship, at both conceptual and empirical levels, emerge from this account. In response to theories of globalization, the study encourages researchers to question assumptions that integrative and competitiveness pressures affect urban areas in a standardized, all-encompassing manner. The fact that London in the early twenty-first century had unprecedented levels of female representation on its municipal council, an influential women's unit in its municipal administration and a new official plan that spoke directly to diverse lived experiences in that city meant citizen representation remained palpable and meaningful along at least three dimensions. In effect, this pattern disconfirms claims by Engin Isin and others that globalizing pressures on cities made all of them hollow, depoliticized spaces where market norms displaced equity, justice and other democratic values.²

In examining the relationship between urban reconfiguration and women's representation, results from Toronto during the early megacity years, when contrasted with those from London in the initial GLA period, point toward the crucial intervening role of central governments and local leaders. If patterns of neo-liberal economic restructuring can be conceived as a fast-moving locomotive bearing down on cities and their citizens, then the response of Conservative government elites in Ontario during the Mike Harris years seemingly placed Toronto and its citizens directly on the tracks. Instead of looking for ways to empower local residents in an age of rapid social and economic change, as New Labour elites claimed they were doing under the GLA scheme, provincial Tories actively withdrew autonomy and funds under their amalgamation and downloading arrangements.

Compounding these significant institutional variations were important differences in the ways that Ken Livingstone and Mel Lastman played the hands that were dealt them. Livingstone systematically pressed for greater independence vis-à-vis his central government masters, while Lastman alternated between lap dog and attack dog responses. Neither of these extremes

appeared to be effective in Toronto, since the first let Queen's Park off the hook for the damage caused initially following amalgamation, while the second was voiced relatively late in the process – when Lastman's credibility was largely spent.

Optimistic accounts by Caroline Andrew and others of urban reconfiguration provide a mirror foil for this same set of conclusions.³ Rather than viewing restructured cities as shields against globalization, and as uniformly welcoming toward progressive mobilization, this study illuminates the wide range of open and closed doors that characterized contemporary London and Toronto, respectively. From this perspective, the partial proportionality rules that helped to increase female representation on the London Assembly to 40 percent and higher, alongside the mayoral leadership that shaped the GLA's bureaucracy and official plans in a manner conducive to women's representation, evidenced the significant potential for progressive action in cities. Conversely, the lack of electoral rule changes in Toronto, combined with women's bureaucratic and spatial planning invisibility during the initial megacity period, revealed how unwelcoming at least one urban environment could be.

In short, the main conclusions drawn from this analysis reveal the limits of blanket pessimistic as well as optimistic urban theories. Clearly, the institutional and leadership circumstances of London and Toronto after GLA creation and amalgamation, respectively, were far from identical – even if both sets of restructurings responded to similar international pressures on cities and central governments. The specificity of central government reactions to these forces emerges quite starkly from this study as an important and often overlooked dimension of the story, as do variations in the leaders voters selected to guide their cities through the post-reconfiguration period.

In London and Toronto during the late 1990s and following, the institutions that central governments created and the mayors elected to make them work could hardly have been more different. The impact of these contrasting circumstances registered firmly and early along the three baseline indicators used in this study. The ways in which they registered, evidencing systematically greater possibilities for citizen representation in London than Toronto, reinforced the conclusions of a major ten-case urban development study by two leading American scholars. According to H.V. Savitch and Paul Kantor, "cities may be converging in some respects, but in many others they remain quite different from one another."⁴

Probing Real-World Consequences

If institutional and political leadership contexts played a crucial role in shaping representational patterns in early post-restructuring London and Toronto, then how might subsequent changes affect urban citizenship? In purely speculative terms, it is worth considering the possible effects of recent elections in both locations. In London, the June 2004 municipal elections returned Ken Livingstone to mayoral office, but weakened Labour's grip on the assembly by reducing that party's seat count from nine to seven (of 25). London Conservatives became the largest bloc on the assembly in 2004, by winning nine positions. Moreover,

although Livingstone gained more votes in the 2004 first round than he did in 2000, his second win over Steven Norris was more narrow than in their initial contest.

Would these GLA results affect women's municipal representation? London Tories and Liberal Democrats criticized the size of the GLA staff, as well as the mayor's taxation and spending records. Two assembly members elected in 2004 came from the UK Independence Party, a formation committed to closing down that body. Whether Livingstone could gain the ongoing support of the two Green party representatives on the assembly, to neutralize these other interests, remained to be seen. What remained obvious was Livingstone's longstanding record as a cagey left populist; he had survived many earlier political reversals and, dating from his GLC years, had consistently treated women's citizenship as an integral part of urban belonging.

At an empirical level, one of the most fascinating questions to emerge from this study concerns the consequences of leadership change in Toronto. Elections in fall 2003 produced a Liberal majority government in Ontario, followed by a left-of-centre mayor in Toronto. Some observers viewed the ascent of Dalton McGuinty as Ontario premier, David Miller as Toronto mayor, and then Paul Martin as federal Liberal party leader and prime minister as extremely promising from the perspective of metropolitan citizenship. Unlike the political executives who preceded them, McGuinty and Martin both represented urban constituencies, in Ottawa and Montreal respectively, and were seen as likely to support Miller and other mayors who demanded a "new deal" for Canada's cities.⁵

Among the most striking characteristics of this new deal was its short-term, fiscal orientation. Even after Martin's federal government agreed to offer municipalities across Canada a reduction or break on the value-added Goods and Services Tax they paid, and once McGuinty's provincial regime announced its willingness to share gasoline tax monies with Ontario cities, the megacity still faced a "\$91-million shortfall on its \$7.06-billion global operating budget" in December 2004.⁶ A 2004 megacity report estimated the amount owing to Toronto for Ontario's share of downloaded childcare, welfare and ambulance services had reached \$62 million.⁷ The city's chief financial officer seemed less than upbeat about these fiscal circumstances. As he remarked in late 2004, "The monies we'll get from the New Deal will help us maintain the status quo."⁸

Toronto's public schools also fared poorly under provincially-imposed processes of policy centralization and cost-cutting. One estimate pegged the sum lost to local schools at "a staggering \$300 million" between 1998 and early 2004.⁹ In terms of enrolment, the numbers of students in Toronto District School Board classes declined by approximately seven percent between 2001 and 2004, or nearly 20,000 pupils in three years.¹⁰ As was the case with the megacity, attempts to address the school board's predicament were primarily fiscal, involving efforts by trustees and parent groups to gain additional provincial funds.¹¹

The February 2005 federal budget and the post-budget deal with the NDP for urban public transit monies clearly assisted Toronto at a fiscal level, but failed

to undo the financial damages associated with policy offloading during the 1990s.¹² Moreover, the same institutional arrangements that the Harris Conservatives established under amalgamation remained in place. Boroughs had disappeared, the megacity council was often viewed as “unwieldy” and the province continued to control decisions about issues ranging from speed bumps and bar hours to the size of Toronto’s municipal council.¹³ Efforts to draft a new City of Toronto Act at the provincial level seemed to be driven primarily by local business interests that wanted greater centralization of power and streamlining of decision-making, rather than by citizenship concerns related to representation, voice and diverse participation.

Clearly, demands that provincial and federal politicians provide more money for the megacity and its school board had a better chance of success after 2003 than earlier. Yet it remained ironic that Mel Lastman’s strategy of trying to get Ontario to pay its bills, make good on promises that amalgamation and downloading would work, and allow Toronto to impose user fees (including for community use after hours of local schools) continued long after his retirement from public office. In fact, during David Miller’s first term as mayor, he continued to press a narrowly fiscal strategy vis-à-vis senior levels of government.

Such an approach begged the obvious question: Was a change of municipal leaders sufficient to get Toronto back on track as a vibrant urban centre? More specifically, could David Miller make the megacity and downloading schemes work after Mel Lastman had failed?

The tentative conclusions that can be drawn from Miller’s early record in office were not entirely promising. While significantly more intelligent and less erratic than Lastman, Miller manifested neither the strategic focus nor the political will necessary to take on tough institutional issues – notably the basic workability of the megacity scheme. Even Miller’s own admirers began to express frustration by the fall of 2004, when one lamented in a local newspaper that “a good CEO gets the right people and sets a few achievable goals and visibly. He hasn’t done that yet.”¹⁴ Miller shuffled the higher echelons of the municipal bureaucracy in the fall of 2004, and appointed a new chief planner who promised “to listen carefully” to city residents.¹⁵ Once again, these were personnel and internal organizational changes that – like the election of a new mayor – left the basic architecture of amalgamation fully intact.

Moreover, David Miller’s background as a corporate lawyer and city council moderate suggested he was unlikely to become a crusading oppositional mayor à la Ken Livingstone. If politicians establish their basic operating styles early and maintain them through their political careers, then Miller seemed an improbable threat to Toronto’s masters at Queen’s Park. Despite an impressive popular vote victory in the November 2003 elections, Mayor Miller did not use this mandate during his first term on the job to educate local citizens about challenges facing the city, or to build support for anything more transformative than fiscal infusions from Ottawa and Queen’s Park. Although he held out the hope from time to time of a more focused and institutionally adventurous agenda, these commitments seemed more rhetorical than real.¹⁶

From the perspective of women's citizenship, the evidence from Miller's initial time in office was mixed. Once elected, the mayor commissioned a review of all existing advisory bodies in Toronto, and unilaterally announced which units would remain and which would end. Some observers expected the Status of Women Committee to be re-energized following Mel Lastman's retirement. According to one city hall insider, "When David Miller was elected as mayor in the fall of 2003, he asked for a review of all existing advisory bodies. Miller then recommended what would continue and what would be dissolved. On the status of women, he asked that it be referred to him. As mid-2004, he has not yet decided."

Through the summer of 2004, his office reserved judgment on the future of a city council advisory committee on the status of women. Miller delayed meeting with Toronto Women's Call to Action, a group formed in February 2004 to press for an effective advisory committee, a gender-based city budgeting process, and the inclusion of women's concerns in local planning activities. Although the impasse between the two sides broke by mid-November 2004 with the formal acceptance of terms of reference for a Status of Women and Gender Equity Working Group, it was far from certain that the new body would be any better resourced or more effective than a series of earlier Toronto committees dating back to the early 1970s. In addition, Toronto's municipal leaders did not take up the challenges posed by a 2004 report by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, which recommended strategies to increase women's involvement in local government.¹⁷

In short, Ken Livingstone seemed likely to pursue the same directions in his second term as he had in 2000 through 2004, while David Miller revealed little interest in improving citizen representation after the Lastman years. Even though the political circumstances that led to amalgamation in Toronto (involving conflict between a right-wing provincial government and progressive downtown mayor) were history, the institutional legacies of that situation -- notably social policy downloading, tight fiscal constraints and the elimination of borough government -- remained firmly in place.

These results dovetail closely with the findings of an earlier research project; in fact, that undertaking stimulated this study of governance changes in London and Toronto.¹⁸ When measured with respect to the treatment of single mothers on social assistance, opportunities for progressive social policy outcomes in Britain during the New Labour years seemed considerably more promising than they did in Canada under a series of Liberal governments beginning in 1993. Clearly, we cannot assume that national-level patterns, or continental trends set by the tone of European Union versus North American integration arrangements, determined the terms of urban citizenship in London and Toronto. Yet the parallels are unmistakable, and may open fruitful new avenues for comparative research about citizens in cities.

Conclusion

By focusing on three dimensions of civic engagement in pre- and initial post-reconfiguration London and Toronto, this study has sidestepped crucial questions about policy outcomes. Would elected women, municipal femocrats or planning documents make much difference to the lived experiences of citizens in either location? How were multiple citizenship challenges facing low-income, often visible minority, immigrant and refugee women, addressed in London and Toronto, given the larger context of welfare reform politics in both places? What were the effects of municipal restructuring on other groups of citizens, including aboriginal interests in Toronto, or lesbians and gays in both cities? Clearly, the data presented in this account cannot answer these queries, but will hopefully stimulate future studies of citizenship patterns in London, Toronto and other metropoli.

Overall, by probing cross-city and cross-time variations in municipal representation, this account can be interpreted in optimistic as well as pessimistic terms. As of summer 2006, reasonable grounds existed for hopefulness in the global age -- if observers focused on the example of the Greater London Authority. At the same time, evidence from post-amalgamation Toronto, and from two of three longitudinal measures in London as well as Toronto, reinforced the case for pessimism, since they demonstrated the degree to which urban citizenship could stagnate or weaken in a measurable way.

Overall, the study has confirmed an intriguing hunch, namely that examining urban governance changes would open a key analytic window, and permit observers to probe the varied impact of contemporary restructuring processes.

NOTES

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¹ See Sylvia Bashevkin, *Tales of Two Cities: Women and Municipal Restructuring in London and Toronto* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006).

² See Engin F. Isin, "Governing Cities Without Government," in Engin F. Isin, ed., *Democracy, Citizenship and the Global City* (London: Routledge, 2000), 157.

³ See, for example, Caroline Andrew, "Municipal Restructuring, Urban Services and the Potential for the Creation of Transformative Political Spaces," in Wallace Clement and Leah Vosko, eds., *Changing Canada: Political Economy as Transformation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2003), 311-34.

⁴ H.V. Savitch and Paul Kantor, *Cities in the International Marketplace: The Political Economy of Urban Development in North America and Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), xviii.

⁵ On early expectations, see Heather Scoffield and Jennifer Lewington, "Big-city mayors welcome 'new deal,'" *Globe and Mail* (3 February 2004), A4.

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- ⁶ John Lorinc, "Is Toronto Going Broke?" *Globe and Mail* (11 December 2004), M1.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, M3.
- ⁸ Joe Pennachetti, as quoted in *ibid.*, M1.
- ⁹ John Lorinc, "Grade Expectations," *Toronto Life* (October 2004), 54.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ¹¹ See *ibid.*
- ¹² See Jennifer Lewington, "Toronto to get \$705.3 million over five years from gas tax," *Globe and Mail* (17 June 2005), A11; and John Barber, "Miller's latest plea for more revenue has a gloomy echo," *Globe and Mail* (9 June 2005), A13.
- ¹³ Jeff Gray, "Want more power? Fix up city council, McGuinty says," *Globe and Mail* (17 June 2005), A12.
- ¹⁴ Alan Broadbent as quoted in Jennifer Lewington and Katherine Harding, "Mr. Miller's Inner Circle," *Globe and Mail* (11 September 2004), M2.
- ¹⁵ Ted Tyndorf as quoted in Jennifer Lewington, "Involve residents early, city's chief planner says," *Globe and Mail* (15 December 2004), A18. On bureaucratic changes, see Bruce Demara and Kerry Gillespie, "Miller Takes a Broom to Seven Top City Jobs," *Toronto Star* (25 November 2004), A1.
- ¹⁶ See, for example, Miller's comments in Doug Saunders, "What Would Ken Do?" *Globe and Mail* (20 November 2004), M1, M3, after meeting his London counterpart.
- ¹⁷ See Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Decision Making: Strategies for More Inclusive Canadian Communities* (Ottawa: FCM, September 2004). For a similar study of engagement and disengagement at the local level in Australia, including in the aftermath of amalgamation in Melbourne, see Marion Frere, *Moving On: Women and Retirement from Victorian Local Government* (Carlton, Victoria: Women's Participation in Local Government Coalition, 2003).
- ¹⁸ See Sylvia Bashevkin, *Welfare Hot Buttons: Women, Work and Social Policy Reform* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).