

ONTARIO'S LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE 1980s: A CASE FOR POLICY INITIATIVES

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Introduction

The theme of the 1980 Institute of Public Administration of Canada Conference, *The Public Administrator and the Public Interest*, evoked a variety of interesting observations about "the widespread dissatisfaction with the current responsiveness of governments and their bureaucracies" [27]. For the student of Ontario's local governments, the most intriguing comments were those apparently based on the assumption that if there is an ever-growing cynicism on the part of the public regarding the activities of elected and non-elected officials alike, it does not extend in any significant degree to the local level of government in Ontario or in any other province. It was implied on several occasions by conference speakers and commentators that since local government, in comparison with federal and provincial levels, is relatively straightforward and closer to the people, almost by definition, problems of responsiveness and accountability are not important issues at this level [30].

While it may be argued that "widespread dissatisfaction" is provoked more by senior levels of government than by the local level, this does not support the premise that it is mainly a federal or provincial issue. Indeed, given the potential of the local level to be the most responsive and accountable of all levels, if there exists serious public dissatisfaction with local government it could have grave consequences in terms of undermining the faith of citizens in all our elected leaders, public administrators, and political institutions.

The purpose of this paper is to comment on the issue of public dissatisfaction with government and its advisors in general terms and to show that in the province of Ontario at least, this is a problem

by no means confined to the senior levels of government. The implications of the existence of a local government system which is not readily understood, and consequently not as responsive and accountable to the public as it should be, will be examined, and recommendations will be made to overcome these serious obstacles to the realization of the full potential of local government.

Public Dissatisfaction

While it seems fair to suggest that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the responsiveness of governments and their bureaucracies at all levels in Ontario, the exact extent to which this is true is difficult to establish. There is, however, substantial evidence to suggest that the public has every reason to be dissatisfied. There are wide gulfs between what governments are supposedly capable of doing and what they actually do. Several examples readily come to mind.

During the 1960s we lived in what in retrospect seems an age of affluence. Governments spent money freely, the economy was in decent shape, and massive new programmes such as medicare and the extensive expansion of post-secondary education were implemented. Governments managed to accomplish all this without massive deficits and, as the former Canadian Auditor General notes, in those days citizens "assumed that the people they had elected and their public servants were spending their tax dollars wisely" [11]. We were told by governments, and we believed, that the economy could be controlled readily, regional disparities could be eliminated entirely, solutions to urban problems could be purchased handily. Professor Donald Smiley argues that the pretensions of government were paralleled at the time by institutions such as universities:

If we were given a blank cheque on the public treasury, which we very nearly were, we academics claimed we could cure anomie, arthritis and the regrettable disposition of Albertans to read both the Holy Scriptures and certain sections of the British North America Act in an overly literal way [21].

As we know only too well, the solutions of the 1960s have become the problems of the early 1980s.

Governments that were apparently omnipotent in the 1960s in terms of their ability to regulate the economy, to control unemployment and inflation, and to promote, in general, never-ending prosperity, are now apparently powerless. The rapid rise in oil prices which commenced in the early 1970s has led to an era of stagflation. In the face of this phenomenon, governments, unwilling to change their traditional economic and political strategies, are bewildered and seemingly impotent. Consequently, the innocence of the so-

called golden years, when we were led to believe that governments were capable of handling all problems, has been shattered, and the public has every reason to view governments at all levels with more and more skepticism.

The apparent inability of governments to manage the economy is not the sole source of the public's resentment and apprehension. The failure of governments to keep their own houses in order by managing public monies in a prudent and accountable manner is also viewed with concern. This problem was mentioned by the Auditor General of Canada in his oft-quoted report to the House of Commons in 1976:

I am deeply concerned that Parliament - and indeed the government - has lost or is close to losing effective control of the public purse Financial management and control in the Government of Canada is grossly inadequate. Furthermore it is likely to remain so until the government takes strong, appropriate and effective measures to rectify this critically serious situation [11].

As far as the public is concerned, the inability of government to supervise wisely the spending of public monies is a problem not found exclusively at the federal level [13].

Cynicism about the inability of governments to manage public funds effectively and efficiently is only surpassed by that reserved for bureaucracies. The enormous expansion of government activities in the 1960s and the early 1970s led, not surprisingly, to the growth of relatively massive bureaucracies at all levels of government to administer new programmes. There is, however, an ever-growing concern on the part of the public that extends from the local level to the national level about the activities and, indeed, the very existence of these bureaucracies. Whether rightly or wrongly, the public is skeptical:

The Parkinsonian notion that bureaucrats can expand their empires and simultaneously reduce their workloads, so that the typical public servant heads a large staff which does very little, is probably the most popular view among ordinary citizens of what goes on in the public sector [3].

Although it could be argued that this is a completely unfair appraisal of bureaucracy, it must be admitted that attempts to control the growth of bureaucracy have not exactly met with success. Indeed, indications are that while cuts may be made in bureaucracy, they are usually made at a level furthest from the desk of the most senior and most highly paid official [3:23]. Also, the public may be excused if it is somewhat cynical about the fact that there are in Ontario over six hundred agencies, boards, and commissions, many of which have outlived their usefulness. In late 1978, the Wiseman

Committee recommended that forty-six of these bodies should be eliminated, merged, or otherwise revised. While it was deliberating on this matter, thirty-one new agencies were created - a situation which led one critic to question whether Mr. Wiseman could eliminate agencies as quickly as the government could create them [25].

While public resentment about this aspect of government growth is perhaps understandable, it is unfortunate, because some regulations and regulatory agencies are obviously required. The inability of governments to handle in a responsible manner the growth and development of their own activities serves to disillusion the public. It also plays into the hands of those who would benefit most, at public expense, if few regulations were in place. As indicated in the following excerpt, opponents of government intervention in general delight in ridiculing this aspect of government activity:

The land developer risks substantial capital in land - only to find that his established zoning has been suspended - that the building heights have been limited to five stories - the capital cost levy has doubled - and that the building code has been revised to withstand the San Francisco earthquake - property taxes have quadrupled - and that, worst of all, he now has to run his storm drainage uphill.

On the other hand, the newly retired hobby farmer learns he must replace the copper nails in his roof under the provisions of the Lightning Rods Act - he must cut down his aging fruit trees under the Abandoned Orchards Act - he must spray his cows under the regulations of the Warble Fly Control Act - but of course finds that he can't do that because he needs a licence under the Pesticides Act - and finally he has to abort his mare because the farm does not comply with the regulations of the Pregnant Mare Urine Farm Act [24].

However skeptical the public might be about government spending, bureaucracy, or the growth of semi-independent agencies, it has no less reason to be cynical about general problems of political accountability. The age of participatory democracy, it could be argued, has passed, and currently taxpayers (and local governments) are bystanders in the great constitutional debate. The people who pay, obey, and, according to democratic theory, are able to hold governments accountable, are spectators only at this intergovernmental clash. As one observer has noted:

Governments are in office to work for citizens; they are not sporting teams to be pitted against one another while citizens are expected to cheer for "our side." This . . . is not governing, it is game playing with government [12:21].

We are left with what another observer of intergovernmental relations has called "an overloaded political system which has gotten out of control, a system of competitive big government which, increas-

ingly incapable of effective governing, burdens the societies it is supposed to serve" [5:21]. The public can perhaps be excused for thinking that all of the bluster surrounding intergovernmental conflicts, the charges and counter-charges, the attempts to lay blame on other doorsteps, is an exercise which has relatively little to do with its best interests. Various levels of governments were put in place to serve the public interest in matters local, provincial, and federal. They were not instituted as devices to confuse and alienate the public.

In the final analysis, governments, their advisors, and political institutions in our society have lost, during the last decade, a great deal of credibility in the eyes of the public. This is a phenomenon that extends beyond the boundaries of any Ontario municipality, and beyond provincial and national boundaries. It extends throughout the free world, a fact illustrated by the election in the late 1970s and early 1980s of political parties in Great Britain, the United States (and, briefly, here in Canada) which campaigned against highly centralized government, big bureaucracy, and big spending. However, to say that this is an international phenomenon does not deny the fact that there is in Ontario, at this time, a crisis of confidence in our democratic processes and institutions.

It should, of course, be pointed out that many of these issues have not been ignored by the senior levels of government. Some serious efforts are being made by provincial and federal governments to promote efficiency and accountability, to control the growth of bureaucracy, and to open up the processes of government via devices such as freedom of information legislation. Counteracting these positive trends, however, is the fact that the massive federal and provincial governments which are in place are unlikely to be able to implement quickly measures to promote "value for money spent," a trim and fit bureaucracy or, generally, a responsive and accountable governmental process. Like dinosaurs, large governments are renowned neither for their wit nor their facility to adjust elegantly to rapidly changing demands and circumstances. In addition, the indications are that the weak economy which is currently struggling to fuel the machinery of government is not likely to recover quickly. During the 1980s, the painful process of transforming an economy based at one time on cheap energy resources to one based on ever more expensive oil and equally expensive alternative energy resources will have to be completed. There is every reason to believe that this painful restructuring process will do little to enhance the image of those governments that preside over it.

Public Dissatisfaction at the Local Level in Ontario

If the main reasons for what could be described as a crisis of

confidence in our democratic institutions are the consequences of decisions taken or problems obvious at the provincial or federal levels, there is no reason for those interested in good government at the local level to be complacent. There is evidence to suggest that the disillusionment with government extends to all levels [13;18;29]. Politicians and administrators at the local level, if responsive at all to the moods of the taxpayers, have to be concerned about the cynical way in which their activities are viewed by their fellow citizens [29]. It could be argued, of course, that this is the case because local politicians and administrators are being tarred (unfairly) with the same brush as their provincial or federal counterparts who are the real instigators of citizen unrest. Indeed, such an argument was put forward by the Auditor General of Canada in 1979, when he noted that federal and provincial bureaucrats and politicians would become more responsive and accountable overnight if, as municipalities do, they had to collect all taxes directly and were forced to cease what he called the "insidious and monstrous bureaucratic stragem" of collecting tax at source:

One has only to contrast the keen personal interest taken by municipal taxpayers in the annual budget of the municipality where they live with the almost complete indifference they display to budget information at the Federal and Provincial levels except only for the direct impact of changes in individual income taxes . . . [The taxpayer] knows the Federal Government can borrow or print the money, thereby deferring the day of reckoning for him personally. The municipality cannot print money and usually cannot borrow money without provincial approval so increased expenditures mean increased taxes - now! [11].

The Auditor General's comments notwithstanding (the budgetary process at the local level is not as straightforward as his remarks suggest), local governments are not without their own serious shortcomings. They too have contributed in no small amount to the unhappiness and disillusionment of the public. From time to time, local politicians and administrators in Ontario have not been above confusing issues by "blaming it on the province" or "on the school board" (in either case this is sometimes justified). They have been seen to build empires, to waste money, to confuse or ignore serious debate on issues of vital concern to the community, to encourage malignant parochialism, to answer critics in "bureaucratese," to refuse to consider seriously required changes in structure and process; in sum, to refuse to lead, to educate, to respond, and to be accountable.

It is tempting to suggest that whatever the political and administrative problems found at the local level, these pale in comparison with those found at the provincial or federal levels, and that the public, well aware of this, tends to overlook these weaknesses. This

argument is in no way acceptable. First, research conducted in the most populous areas of Ontario indicates that the public is seriously disillusioned by the inability of local governments to properly manage their affairs [4;13]. Secondly, if confidence in our democratic processes is to be restored at all levels of government, local governments must be responsive, accountable and well-managed. Generally speaking, they must be free from the problems that plague the more senior levels of government.

The reason we must be deeply concerned about the vitality of democracy at the local level is that, of all levels, only this one is flexible enough, small enough, and close enough to the people to be capable of responding quickly and to be readily accountable to them. Municipal governments, if organized, structured, and managed properly, are the only governments with the capacity to revitalize the faith of the public in our democratic processes and institutions.

That local governments should perform such a vital role is not a novel idea. Prominent political theorists have long argued that a strong, free local government is important, indeed essential, for the well-being of a democratic society. The most famous of the theorists' pronouncements on this issue is de Tocqueville's observation that "municipal institutions constitute the strength of free nations." It has also been argued, to cite more specific examples, that local government is the training school in the practice of democracy; it is the level of government which allows citizens control of their own affairs, and it affords citizens a real opportunity to experience and understand the workings of representative government. A comment made by Grant Crawford in his book, *Canadian Municipal Government*, sums up succinctly many of these views:

The major political function of local government in a democracy, however, is not that of training citizens and elected representatives for the practice of democratic government in the provincial and national spheres; it is the actual exercise of democracy at the local level. There are many and varied definitions of democracy, but basically it means the conduct of government in accordance with the wishes of the governed. At no other level of government is this more nearly possible or more nearly attained than at the local level [6].

The theorists' view that municipal governments have the potential to foster a strong belief in the democratic process is based on the very important premise that these governments are themselves democratic in nature. However, research conducted in one part of Ontario (these findings apply apparently to other areas as well) [13;29] indicates that democracy at the local level is imperilled because citizens are almost totally ignorant about the structure and functions of their local governments. In the course of this research it was discovered that:

Only two adult residents of Waterloo Region in seven know that the Board of Education and/or the Separate School Board are responsible for running the schools and setting education tax rates. Two in five know the Grand River Conservation Authority is responsible for flood control. About two in six know the local council provides fire protection, and only two people in every fifty - 4% - know that the Police Commission is responsible for police protection. In total only one person in seventy-five could . . . [say] who was responsible for all four of these services. Yet these represent the two most expensive local services and the three major emergency services. They are the high profile services about which it is reasonable to expect people to be most knowledgeable and concerned [29].

These comments were made about the knowledge of citizens in an area where only recently a regional government had been instituted. On the surface at least, this appears to be a reasonable explanation for citizen confusion. As part of the same survey, however, it was found that citizens in an adjoining county, which had not been restructured in any way, demonstrated an equal level of ignorance about which local body acted on their behalf and for what purpose.

The question we are left with is this: How can people have faith in the democratic process, even at the local level, if they are almost completely unaware of the structures and functions of local government units? The answer is, they cannot. Indeed, the responses to another survey conducted at the same time indicated that the less knowledgeable a person was about government at the local level, the more likely he or she was to be cynical and critical and to say that government was unresponsive or ineffective [9]. There is an additional point to be made. If the 1980s is to be a decade of economic restraint, some very difficult political and administrative decisions will have to be taken at the local level regarding service and programme cutbacks. If wise decisions are to be made, input from an *informed* community is essential. In its absence, the very existence of democratic local government systems will be imperilled by rebellious taxpayers [29].

If the public is confused about which unit of local government is acting, or not acting, on its behalf, or if it is skeptical about the extent to which hard-earned tax dollars are being handled with care, perhaps it can be excused. The plethora of special purpose bodies at the local level serve to so confuse the focus of public authority that it is little wonder the citizens are bewildered by and cynical about the political process. As indicated in one study, the presence of such bodies certainly does not promote confidence in the system: "Anyone [living in a Region] who has tried to get a crossing guard to help school children cross a regional road has experienced an institutional merry-go-round of some proportions involving the Police Commission, at least one school board, the Regional Council and

usually the local council" [29].

If confronted by an irate taxpayer complaining about confusion created by the multiplicity of special purpose bodies at the local level, the local administrator or politician would be quite right in pointing out that many of these bodies are created by the province, which chooses to delegate authority in some instances not to the municipalities but to other units of local government [18]. This answer is small consolation to the citizen who is trying to find out who is responsible for what. The public may also be somewhat confused and angered by those councillors who, over the years, have encouraged the fragmentation of the decision making process. A comment made in the *Report, Niagara Local Government Review*, summarized this approach:

The councillors up at Pitlochry
Believed in the creed of Ad Hockery
They farmed all decisions
To boards and commissions
And so made their council a mockery [15].

If the public finds it difficult, in the presence of special purpose bodies, to ascertain which body is responsible for carrying out certain functions, it is completely confused and frustrated when it comes to determining whether rational financial planning is the order of the day at the local level. A description of the complexity of the budget-setting process illustrates the problem:

The City is required to collect the taxes it needs, plus the money the Region needs for its purposes, plus the money the County Board of Education needs, plus the money for the Separate School Board, plus the money for the Police Commission, plus the money for the Children's Aid Society. The City . . . which has to collect the taxes for the other . . . bodies then sets its own budget and sends out its tax bill Because most people are not aware of all this . . . it is little wonder our elected City and Regional representatives cannot seem to convince us that they are not able to control property taxes. Between them they control less than 40% of the tax bill Under these conditions, we can be forgiven for asking who is guarding the till and deciding for us which needs of the community will be met and which will have to wait until we can afford them. The answer appears to be "Nobody" [29].

However difficult it is for taxpayers to understand and have confidence in the method of allocating resources at the local level, it is equally difficult for them to derive any benefit from financial reports and explanations published by municipalities. All municipalities, of course, publish annual statements that are apparently meant to enlighten the taxpayers and to assure them that the finances are in order. For reasons unknown, however, many municipalities seem

determined to publish these statements in a form that would baffle even expert accountants.

Comments on the obstacles that are in place to undermine the confidence of the public in the ability of the municipal governments to undertake sound financial planning must include a reference to the insidious device of conditional grants to municipalities. This "Puppet on a Shoestring" situation means that the province, almost on whim, can lay waste the best made plans of even the most responsible and prudent municipality. Most taxpayers would throw up their hands in disgust if they had any idea of the extent to which conditional grants undermine the establishment of local priorities and frustrate attempts at long-term financial planning. Many newcomers to politics soon find that they do not understand local government finance as well as they should and that their campaign promises "to trim the costs, to reduce taxes" are meaningless in light of the financial control which the province has over municipalities and school boards alike.

If the public is suspicious that spending at the local level is beyond its scrutiny and control, it has every reason to be equally skeptical about its power to restrict the growth of local bureaucracies. There is, of course, at least one very good reason for the rapid expansion of bureaucracies in recent years, a fact made abundantly clear by examining carefully the range of costly and sophisticated services offered by even a medium-sized city. However, from the point of view of the public, worried as it is about "too much government" in general, the size of the local bureaucracy is not acceptable [13]. The response of politicians in at least some areas (the reference here is to areas where two-tier regional governments are in place) does little to lay to rest the qualms expressed by the public. Instead, even those politicians who are members of regional council are quick to agree with the taxpayer that indeed, bureaucracy at "the Region" is a problem [13;29]. If it is a problem, these are the very people who are responsible for it and, at the same time, have the political clout to do something about it. The fact that these same *ex officio* members of regional council devote the great majority of their time and attention to matters in their area municipality (where they are elected) might explain the necessity for large regional staffs; someone has to govern and if the politicians will not do it, non-elected officials will.

Proposals for Reform

In order to revitalize public confidence in democratic processes at the local level, a number of reforms are necessary. Local governments must be made more readily understandable, less bureaucratic, more efficient, and more accountable than they are at present.

To realize these objectives, it is obvious that as a first step the public should be well informed. It is equally clear that the responsibility for informing the public must be assumed by those who serve at the local level. Municipalities and other local authorities could alleviate some of the confusion caused by complex structures and intricate processes if they communicated information on taxes, spending, services and lines of political accountability in a clear and concise manner. As indicated previously, the responsibility to inform has not always been taken seriously. There is, however, some reason for optimism. Recently, some local government units have begun to experiment with more sophisticated methods of communication [29]. For example, Ontario's newest municipality, The Corporation of the Township of the Archipelago, has passed a by-law to provide for the reimbursement of expenses incurred by members of Council in sending regular, written reports to their constituents [22]. While publicly-funded newsletters are a communications device used widely by politicians at both the federal and provincial levels, it is a novel idea at the local level in Ontario - one that should be considered seriously by all municipalities and other local government units.

While some of the confusion surrounding Ontario's local government system could be remedied immediately and easily by improved communication techniques, these are of limited use because they are capable of treating only the symptoms, not the disease. The system itself is highly (and unnecessarily) complex and no amount of public relations exercises can get to the root of the problem. What is required is fundamental change involving both institutions and processes. Comprehensive reform is necessary for two major reasons: to make the system itself less confusing and bureaucratic, more efficient and accountable; and, by so doing, to prevent local politicians from further confusing, frustrating and alienating the public by turning to their own political advantage the shortcomings which currently plague Ontario's local governments.

Reforms which might be considered are readily identifiable. They have been documented at length by a series of provincially sponsored reports, including those of regional government review commissions, a royal commission, and, for some areas that have not been reorganized in recent years, local government reviews. Some of the major recommendations made in these reports are summarized here and are proposed as the reforms required if public confidence is to be restored, ultimately, in democratic processes at the local level.

One of the major obstacles to the development of an efficient and responsive local government system continues to be the presence of special purpose bodies. While the introduction of a metropolitan government and regional governments in Ontario marked the elim-

ination of a vast number of special purpose authorities, even in these reformed systems some remain and, consequently, it is still virtually impossible for the public to determine who is responsible for what [18;29]. The existence of these bodies not only allows local politicians to avoid responsibility [18;29]; it also impedes "rational financial planning and control in local government" [18]. With the exception of boards of education, which are "firmly rooted in our political traditions" [18], and conservation authorities, whose control of necessity extends beyond the boundaries of many municipalities, all local government functions should be assigned to municipal councils.

A second major obstacle to the development of an efficient and responsive local government system is the two-tier municipal structure found in most parts of Ontario. While the purposes of two-tier structures are obvious ("to meet the dual objectives of providing as much local autonomy as possible and ensuring that area-wide functions are carried out effectively" [18]), it is also evident that the flawed structures currently in place frustrate rather than promote the realization of these goals. The structures encourage duplication of services, inefficient use of resources and conflicts of jurisdiction. At the same time, accountability is blurred and accessibility is hindered. As noted in the *Report*, Hamilton-Wentworth Review Commission, these structures also contribute to parochialism because each area municipality within the system attempts "to protect its separate existence . . . , even at the expense of the overall needs of the people of the Region" [8].

With the exception of the Hamilton-Wentworth Review Commission, all regional government review commissions as well as the Royal Commission on Metropolitan Toronto recommended that two-tier structures should be retained - but reformed. The changes suggested included elimination of service duplications and jurisdictional disputes by assigning, where possible, exclusive responsibility for functions to either one or the other of the two levels; and changes in the indirect method of election used to select metropolitan or regional councillors in order to clarify lines of accountability and discourage parochialism. The commissions reserved special consideration for the problems created by the indirect method of election. It leads to the development of a powerful bureaucracy because councillors serving on both area municipality and upper-tier councils tend to concentrate attention on their own local area and, by default, leave the running of "Metro" or "the Region" in the hands of non-elected officials [18;29;8;16]. Also, during election campaigns and while in office, these same politicians refuse to accept responsibility for what happens at the metropolitan or regional level [29;8]. As documented by the Waterloo Region Review Commission, some members of regional council play a "Jekyll and Hyde game" and

abdicate their responsibilities by refusing to acknowledge that they, as regional councillors, are part of the regional system" [29].

In order to overcome these problems, all commissions recommended some form or other of a direct system of election for members of upper-tier councils. The Hamilton-Wentworth Review Commission, however, rejected completely the possibility of reforming the two-tier system in that Region. In light of the difficulties posed by a system which encourages officials to continuously "stress their differences," the Commission recommended a single-tier local government structure - one which would "receive the loyalties of all those elected to it and . . . [make it] impossible to blame another level of government for decisions" [8].

In addition to recommending various means of overcoming problems posed by special purpose bodies and two-tier structures, the commissions also recommended a number of other reforms [8;16;17;18;29]. Among the more important of these are suggestions that if local governments are to respond to the wishes and needs of the local populace, they must be given more legal and financial power by the Province. While admitting that some municipalities are obviously more able than others to handle added responsibilities, it is emphasized that a truly efficient and responsive system of local government cannot exist until the Province discontinues the "Father Knows Best" method of dealing with all municipalities [18;29].

It is one thing to identify some of the major reforms necessary to rectify the shortcomings of Ontario's local government system; it is quite another to determine who should be responsible for initiating and carrying out these reforms. It seems reasonable to suggest, however, that Ontario's Conservative Government has an essential role to play. According to the *British North America Act*, the Province is responsible for municipal institutions. It has created the structures and, by statute and financial influence, it determines in specific terms the responsibilities of local governments. Further, as has been the case elsewhere, the thrust for significant local government reform in recent years has come from the senior level of government [7;19]. Indeed, it has been suggested as a general principle that local government reform is unlikely to be realized unless a senior level of government is involved [20]. In the Ontario case, the provincial government dictated the pace and scope of the major reforms which produced Metropolitan Toronto and a series of regional and restructured governments [7]. This heavy-handed approach was justified on the grounds that "ultimately, it is the Province that must decide and take responsibility for policy in local government reform" [7].

While the provincial government may have been aggressive in fostering local government reform up to the early 1970s, since that time it has become increasingly obvious that the Province cannot be

counted on to initiate further reforms. In fact, a glance at some of the major decisions made during the past eight years indicates that the provincial government has completely reversed its aggressive stance and decided that it will no longer initiate major local government reform. First of all, in early 1973, in response to widespread opposition to regional government, the Conservative Government announced "a slow-down in the aggressive programme of reform" and abandoned an ambitious time-table which suggested "that by 1975 virtually the whole southern part of the Province should be covered by the regional government programme" [7]. Subsequently, the Government announced that there would be no more regional or restructured governments introduced unless the impetus for these came from the local level. Second, in response to a vociferous and sustained public outcry from those areas where regional governments are in place, the provincial government commissioned in the late 1970s a series of regional government review commissions to study four of these regions [8;16;17;29]. During this same period, a Royal Commission was established to study the government of Metropolitan Toronto [18]. These commissions identified major problems and recommended important changes, but the Conservative Government reacted by implementing only one major recommendation; all the others were either shelved or ignored [2]. While the Province refused to take a leadership role, it did suggest that changes would be considered if the pressure for these came from the municipalities themselves [2].

The reluctance of the Conservative Government to take the initiative and to implement some of the major recommendations made has been explained by the fact that from the mid-1970s until the spring of 1981 the Conservative Government was in a minority position in the Ontario Legislature and was not willing to accept the political risks involved in introducing important local government reform [2]. However, in the months immediately following the March 1981 election which returned a majority Conservative Government, it soon became clear that this Government would be no more adventuresome than its weaker predecessors. In July 1981, in response to demands from some municipalities that the Province should consider allowing them to secede from their respective Regions, the Minister of Housing, Mr. Claude Bennett, announced that "there is absolutely no hope of any municipality being allowed to get out of an existing regional government structure" [26]. The Government was taking this stance because, as the minister noted, "we still believe it [regional government] is workable If you want a crass, political reason, then it's partly because we've done very well politically even where regional government exists" [26].

While stating categorically that the Province would not consider dismantling even a part of the regional government system, the

Minister also closed the door on the possibility of the Province taking the initiative to introduce even minor reforms within the system. Councils should "solve their own problems," he said, and if municipalities within the system see the need for change, they should take the initiative themselves and make recommendations to the Province [26]. Any alternatives suggested, however, "would have to be within the [regional] system" [26].

In the absence of provincial leadership on the issue of local government reform, it is obvious that the push for reform must come from the local level. Whether politicians at that level are willing to accept the risks involved in promoting major reforms remains to be seen. To date, many local politicians have been content to wait for the Province to take the initiative, and they have not always made good use of the opportunities they have been given to initiate changes. There are, however, a number of indications which suggest that they will have to respond during this decade to the challenges which have been issued and that the Province's attempts during the past eight years to force local governments to come to grips with the major problems that characterize the system may finally bear fruit.

Up to this point, many politicians in the metropolitan, regional and other local government systems in Ontario have been quick to blame other levels of government as the source of all problems. Indeed, it could be argued that these politicians have had a vested interest in *not* improving the system. As long as "Metro" or "the Region" or "the County" could be blamed for problems, local politicians could deny responsibility and avoid examining their own contributions to the problems. As long as the pressure for reform from the public was not great, politicians could get away with exploiting for their own advantage the weaknesses of the local government system. As indicated in this paper, however, there is every reason to believe that the public is becoming increasingly critical of the system and of those who work within it and that pressure for change is becoming more pronounced. In areas where regional governments are in place, extensive pressure for reform is already evident [13]. The need for change is not confined to the Regions, however, and as we move further into the economically troubled 1980s there is little question that demands for more efficient, responsive, and accountable local governments will accelerate in all parts of Ontario. Local politicians who ignore these demands will do so at their political peril [29].

While it seems reasonable to suggest that local politicians will attempt to respond to these demands for change, a question remains as to whether they will prove equal to the task of initiating the fundamental reforms required. On the surface it appears that they are incapable of doing so because, as indicated previously, major

reform in recent years has been the product of strong provincial leadership. It should be kept in mind, however, that during the mid-1960s, some of the local governments that were facing serious developmental pressures were involved in taking initiatives for reform and were active participants in the original processes which eventually led to the introduction of regional government [7]. In fact, it could be argued that the reason the Province eventually adopted an aggressive leadership role in promoting regional government was not because some local governments were unwilling to take initiatives for reform, but because the provincial government became impatient with their cautious approach to reform. In the end, the Province rejected "this slow and very selective" approach to reform and usurped the role of local governments in the reform process. In sum, the Province rejected what L. J. Sharpe has called "the principle that local authorities have a right to define the scope and nature of change themselves" [19].

There are other, more recent cases which illustrate that local governments are willing, when change is deemed necessary, to take the initiative for reform. For example, the City of Brantford, the Township of Brantford, and Brant County have recently "devised a way to deal with problems of municipal growth without creating an expensive and cumbersome regional government" [13]. These municipalities have reached an agreement which provides for boundary adjustments, coordinated planning and sharing of costs of transportation and health and welfare programmes - issues which in other areas are handled by a regional government [13]. "There is no overlap of responsibility for delivery of services. The city has control within its boundaries, and the township has control in its area" [13]. A similar agreement has been reached recently by the City of Barrie and the Township of Innisfil. Although this compromise was "sweetened" by a transitional grant from the Province, it was mainly the result of initiatives taken by the local governments themselves [14]. As noted in an editorial in *Municipal World*, the Barrie-Innisfil case provides "further evidence of the effectiveness of the negotiation process for resolving boundary disputes . . . [and] . . . will provide a further incentive to the more than twenty municipalities presently facing similar problems" [14].

There is an additional sign that the local level is now prepared to take the initiative for change. Effective January 1982, the new Association of Municipalities of Ontario was formed by a merger of the three principal municipal associations in the Province - the former Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Rural Ontario Municipal Association and the Association of Counties and Regions of Ontario. By approaching the provincial government with a strong, united front, the municipalities hope to lobby more success-

fully on such issues as "tax and grant reform, fiscal policy and arbitration in labour contracts" [28].

While there are a number of indicators which suggest that politicians at the local level are not adverse to taking the initiative for reform, it must be pointed out that the Conservative Government has a record of consistently rejecting reform proposals with which it does not agree [13]. It should be asked, therefore, Is the Government likely to respond if the local level requests significant and extensive reforms? While there is little question that the Government is unlikely to modify its cautious approach to change by accepting everything recommended by the local level, it is reasonable to suggest that the Conservative Party has not remained in power in Ontario since 1943 by consistently rejecting changes that are obviously required [31]. In fact, since "the end of the Second World War it has been the Conservative party's capacity to . . . [implement] . . . cautious reform . . . which has guaranteed its hold on the reins of power" [31]. This strong tradition, combined with the clear commitment it has made to respond to requests from the local level, provides assurance that the Government will not turn a deaf ear to pleas for reform from local governments.

Conclusions

In the final analysis, the comprehensive local government reform required can only be undertaken by local and provincial politicians acting in unison. On the one hand, it is the responsibility of the local politicians to make the current system as understandable, accountable, responsive, and efficient as possible while, at the same time, recommending to the Province reforms that will improve the system. On the other hand, it is the responsibility of the Conservative Government to listen to its local counterparts, to implement the major reforms suggested, and to accept its share of the political risks involved in reform. In particular, the Conservative Government must be prepared to admit the shortcomings of its original local government reform policy and to move quickly on any suggestions made by local governments to reform defective structures, confusing methods of election, and overly centralized funding arrangements.

The importance of achieving comprehensive local government reform cannot be overestimated. There is, as indicated, a crisis of confidence in democratic institutions at all levels of government. At the local level, citizens are confused about the structures and functions of government; they are frustrated in their attempts to determine whether their money is being spent wisely; they are cynical to the point that they stay home in droves on election day. If this state

of affairs is allowed to continue, democracy at the local level will become ever weaker and, eventually, will cease to exist. In view of this possibility and of the fact that if faith is to be restored in the democratic processes at all levels of government it must be revitalized first at the local level, it is not too strong to say that comprehensive local government reform in Ontario is essential.

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