

Regional Restructuring in Montreal: An Historical Analysis*

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The current upsurge of interest in metropolitan government on both sides of the Atlantic is mirrored in the debates raging in Montreal. An earlier boom period in the formation of metropolitan structures in the western world, the 1960s and early 1970s, left the region of Montreal with a legacy of partially fulfilled hopes and promises. At that time, as in many other countries, the political debate centred around issues of service provision, economies of scale and the need for coordination in matters such as land-use, control of urban sprawl, transportation and environmental protection. The instrumental arguments focused on size, territorial extent and representation.

Today, while these arguments are still voiced loudly, the context has changed markedly. On the one hand is the ethos of globalisation and the perception that cities must be competitive on the world stage in order to prosper. Neoliberalism, the retreat of the welfare state, and the restructuring of the responsibilities and financial arrangements of the various levels of government have led to increased social fragmentation, social exclusion, often among immigrant groups, and severe inequities between the various parts of metropolitan areas. The central cities tend to house the poor and harbour the homeless, while the suburbs attract the more affluent.

On the other hand is the acknowledgment of the importance of localism, community values, knowing why and how dollars are spent, participatory governance, consensual partnerships, along with increasing powers of special interest groups, business leaders, and corporatism in general. The ideas from the 1960s

* The authors are indebted to Philippe Paquin for preparing the maps shown in this article and to anonymous referees for giving them useful comments on an earlier draft.

and early 1970s, of top-down directives, forced municipal amalgamations, imposed regional or metropolitan structures, are being challenged by principles of grassroots planning and collaborative action.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the slow march of the region of Montreal towards metropolitan governance. It is organised in a chronological manner and follows the historical evolution of policies and debates. Over the decades, local, regional and provincial actors have come to recognise the interdependence of central and suburban municipalities. But they have offered different definitions of what ails the region and have resorted to different rationales for government action (or inaction) on these problems.

If there is one continuous thread in Montreal's long saga of half-failed reforms, it is the fact that there is, politically speaking, no such thing as the problem of metropolitan governance. At any given time, various issues get conflated and often confused; over time, different problems gain prominence while others recede into the background. Governmental reforms do not proceed merely because the various parties agree on the problems at hand; they occur when the authorities experience a sense of urgency about one or another issue, be it infrastructure provision, environmental preservation, municipal solvency or economic competitiveness.

We argue that the most recent round of municipal reform and regional institution-building is a continued reaction to the fiscal crisis of the State and that it lays the groundwork for a downloading of responsibilities from central to local government. Alongside the search for zero deficits on the part of the province (and the federal government), however, the desire to improve equity among municipalities and the will to foster democracy are strong motivations for local actors.

As balancing budgets, downloading responsibilities to lower-level governments, and keeping older cities competitive in the world economy are the order of the day, municipal amalgamations and regional coordination mechanisms are of great interest to decision-makers. In the case of Montreal, local factors such as the political culture of the province and the persistence of linguistic tensions add to the difficulty of arriving at consensual decisions in the region. Though regional economic development policy in Quebec is predicated on "concertation" among local actors, top-down government intervention will be required to combat the fiscal inequality that exists among municipalities and the environmental damage that is caused by suburban sprawl in the Montreal metropolitan area. How much harm local democracy will suffer in the process remains an open question.

The Context

The census-defined metropolitan area of Montreal is home to about 3.4 million people (1998 data), of which around 1.8 million live on the Island of Montreal, about one third of a million on Île Jésus (a single municipality, Ville Laval),

about two thirds of a million on the so-called South Shore, and the rest on the

TABLE 1 Population Size and Change, Montreal Census Metropolitan Area, 1971-1996

| | Population 1971 | Population 1996 | Change 1971-1996 |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Montreal ¹ | 1,253,685 | 1,016,376 | - 18.93% |
| MUC ¹ | 1,959,135 | 1,775,846 | - 9.36% |
| CMA ¹ | 2,721,945 | 3,326,510 | + 22.21% |

Notes: 1. Montreal = City of Montreal; MUC = Montreal Urban Community; CMA = Census Metropolitan Area.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census.

TABLE 2 Employment Growth in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver CMAs, 1971-1991

| | Change 1971-81 | Growth (%) | Change 1981-91 | Growth (%) |
|-----------|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|
| Toronto | 499,000 | 44.8 | 334,000 | 20.7 |
| Montreal | 336,000 | 36.7 | 158,000 | 12.6 |
| Vancouver | 210,000 | 51.9 | 170,000 | 27.0 |

Source: Coffey (2000).

TABLE 3 Concentration of Population and Employment in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver CMAs (shares of Canadian total), 1971-1991

| | Pop. 1971 (%) | Pop. 1991 (%) | Emp. 1971 (%) | Emp. 1991 (%) |
|-----------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Toronto | 12.2 | 14.3 | 15.4 | 15.6 |
| Montreal | 12.7 | 11.5 | 12.7 | 11.3 |
| Vancouver | 5.0 | 5.9 | 5.6 | 6.3 |

Source: Coffey (2000: 138).

TABLE 4 Employment distribution in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver CMAs (shares of CMA total), 1991

| | Jobs (total) | Centr. City (%) | Inner Sub. (%) | Outer Sub. (%) |
|-----------|--------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Toronto | 2,039,720 | 32.6 | 31.8 | 35.7 |
| Montreal | 1,474,545 | 47.6 | 25.7 | 26.7 |
| Vancouver | 784,565 | 39.8 | 30.9 | 29.4 |

Source: Filion and Rutherford (2000: 365).

North Shore and in Vaudreuil-Soulanges county to the west of the archipelago. The City of Montreal occupies the centre and the northern tip of the Island of Montreal and has a population of just over one million. While the population of the Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) has been growing steadily, that of Montreal and of the Island of Montreal have declined over the past decades (Table 1). And while the metropolitan area as a whole has continued to grow demographically and economically in absolute terms, it has been losing ground in relative terms to Toronto, Vancouver and other major cities in Canada (Tables 2 and 3).

On the other hand, Montreal is a stronger core in its CMA than are Toronto and Vancouver (Table 4) and its employment base is decentralising at a slower rate than that of the other two regions (Coffey et al. 1996; Filion and Rutherford

TABLE 5 Distributions of Cities According to Size, Montreal CMA, 1996

| Size | Number |
|---------------------|--------|
| > 1,000,000 | 1 |
| 300.000 - 1.000.000 | 1 |
| 100.000 - 300.000 | 1 |
| 50.000 - 100.000 | 9 |
| 10.000 - 50.000 | 47 |
| 1.000 - 10.000 | 47 |
| < 1.000 | 5 |
| Total | 111 |

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census.

2000).

The CMA does not cover all the functionally-defined area of the metropolitan basin, and so for some recent studies the “Greater Montreal Region” (GMR) has been employed, a territory that encompasses all the counties which contain suburban growth (Groupe de travail sur Montréal et sa région 1993a). The GMR covers a total of one hundred thirty six municipalities, the CMA one hundred eleven (Figure 1). These belong to 17 different regional bodies, 16 Regional County Municipalities (*municipalités régionales de comté*, MRC) and one Urban Community (*communauté urbaine*) (Figure 2). For public transit purposes, they fall within the territory of one metropolitan agency, the *Agence métropolitaine de transport* (AMT). The Montreal Urban Community (MUC) covers the Island of Montreal and consists of 28 municipalities, of which the City of Montreal is one. For the purposes of provincial administration, for instance in the realm of health and social welfare and of economic development, the metropolitan territory is divided into five regions, Montreal, Laval, Laurentides, Lanaudiere and Montérégie, the last three stretching well beyond Greater Montreal into distant rural hinterlands (Figure 3).

The municipalities are widely divergent in population size, territorial extent and capabilities. In number of residents, according to the 1996 Census, they range from a handful, literally (Île Dorval, 2 residents) to over a million (Montreal, 1,016,376 residents). Only Laval and Longueuil have more than 100,000 souls, and a majority of cities have fewer than 10,000 inhabitants (Table 5). The situation in the suburbs reflects, though only weakly, the overwhelming presence of very small municipalities in Quebec as a whole. Even though the province has managed to reduce the number of municipalities over the past decades (from about 1600 in 1970 to about 1300 today), entities with fewer than 1,000 residents and with fewer than 5,000 residents account for 42% and 84% of all

municipalities, respectively (Ministère des Affaires municipales et de la Métropole 2000).

To benefit from economies of scale in the delivery of services, most cities in the Montreal region and in the province have entered into inter-municipal agreements, in which either a large municipality provides services for smaller



FIGURE 1 Municipalities, Greater Montreal Region



FIGURE 2 Regional County Municipalities, Greater Montreal Region

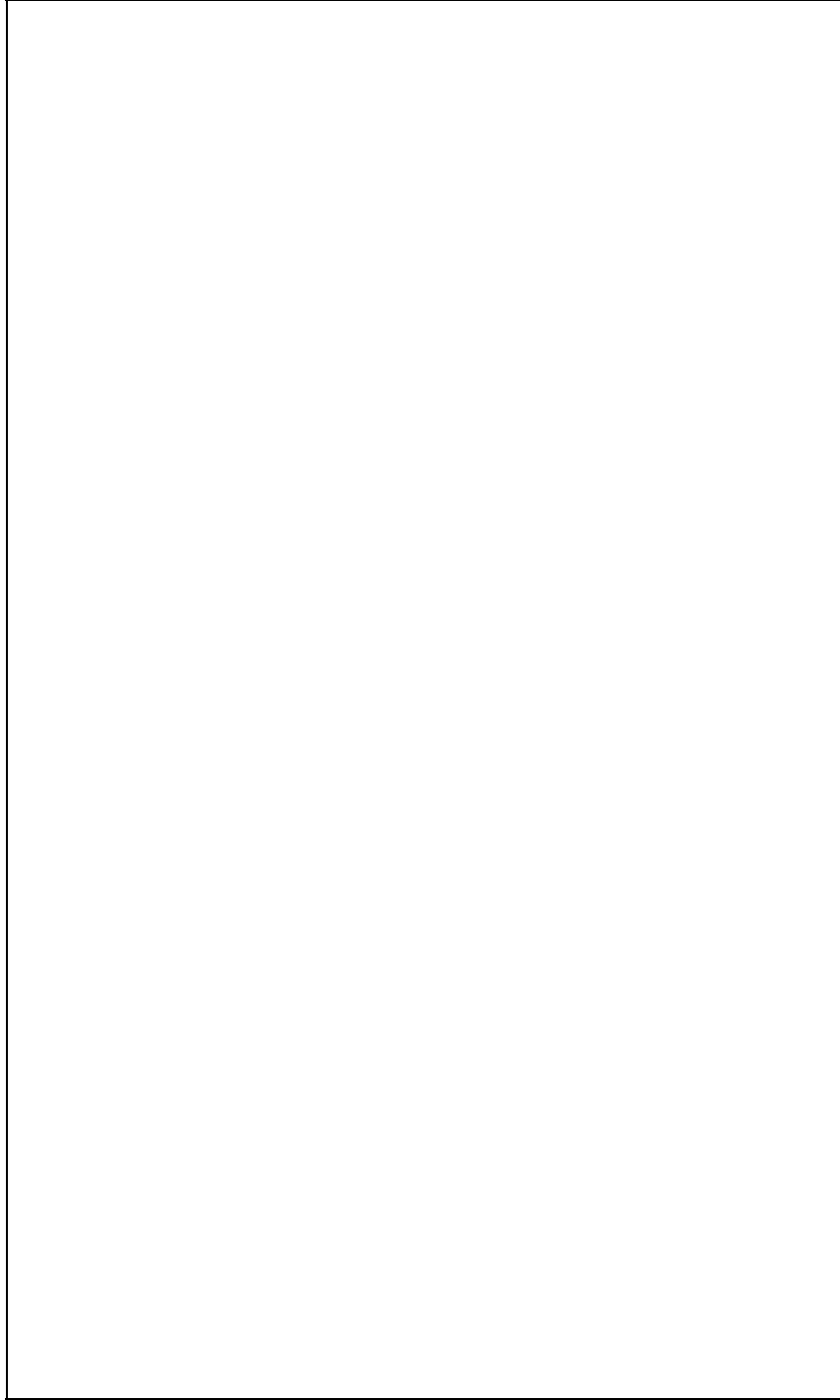


FIGURE 3 Administrative Regions, Greater Montreal Region

ones, or a group of municipalities band together to provide a joint service through an Inter-municipal Board (*régie intermunicipale*). These agreements may or may not fall within the boundaries of an MRC, and areas served are rarely of the same extent. There are seventy-seven *ententes intermunicipales* or service-sharing agreements operating in the region, each governed by a board of municipal representatives.

Evolution of Metropolitan Structures (1960-1995)

The desirability of a metropolitan-wide agency for the region of Montreal has been debated at least since the turn of the century, when settlement began to flow out of the city, and indeed off the island, as the major railroads were built (the Victoria Bridge to the South Shore was opened in 1860). One of the earliest proponents of regional governance was Georges A. Nantel, an *ancien bleu* (old Tory) and once provincial minister of public works, who pleaded for the creation of a general council for the whole island to resolve problems of service delivery and road planning (Nantel 1910). The League for Civic Improvement, made up of business and professional leaders, was equally insistent (Atherton 1914). Although a Metropolitan Parks Commission had been created in 1910, it was only in 1921, when Montreal announced its intention of annexing four near-bankrupt suburban municipalities, that the provincial government stepped in to impose a regional government structure, the Montreal Metropolitan Commission, on the island. The Commission, controlled by seven City councillors and seven suburban delegates plus the City comptroller, was made responsible for fiscal management, namely the control of borrowing by suburban municipalities and the servicing of debt. Other duties included the planning of major infrastructure, especially main roads (Léveillé 1978).

The enormous suburban growth following World War II again stirred interest in metropolitan problems. In 1952 the provincial government ordered the Paquette Commission to examine problems caused by sprawl and traffic. Reporting in 1955, the commission recommended the creation of a new metropolitan organism to administer various inter-municipal services and to act as a general conciliator of all the island's municipal interests (Commission d'étude des problèmes métropolitains de Montreal 1955). This work was soon followed by the efforts of the Croteau Commission (Comité de recommandations pour la création d'un organisme métropolitain 1958). Established by the city, it called for the creation of an even stronger Corporation of Greater Montreal, which would have included not only the Island of Montreal, but also Île Jesus and eight municipalities on the South Shore.

No direct action came from either of these recommendations. Yet, in 1959 the Montreal Metropolitan Commission was revived with a new name, the Montreal Metropolitan Corporation, and representation extended to 14 members from Montreal and 14 from the suburbs, with a chair appointed by the province.

It became responsible for the coordination of property assessment on the island and for the provision of such other services as the majority of municipalities wished. It can be credited with initiating the Metropolitan Boulevard, but otherwise was almost as weak as its predecessor.

The Quiet Revolution was ushered in with the defeat of the *Union nationale* and the election of the liberals under the leadership of Jean Lesage in 1960. In the same year, the populist Jean Drapeau was re-elected mayor of Montreal, a position he was then to hold for almost thirty years. With the avowed intention of modernising the state, the Lesage government passed almost seventy laws affecting municipalities in some way, and the problems of Montreal again came under scrutiny (Saint-Pierre 1994). The city's charter was revised in 1962 and decision-making power was concentrated in an Executive Committee (Department of Municipal Affairs 1960, 1961).

Nor were metropolitan problems ignored. The Blier Commission, also appointed by the province, started work in 1964 (Commission d'étude des problèmes intermunicipaux dans l'Île de Montréal 1965). It was composed of Paul Blier, an assistant deputy minister of municipal affairs, Lucien Saulnier, the powerful chairman of the City Executive Committee, and Reginald Dawson, mayor of the Town of Mount Royal, one of the more prosperous suburbs, a trio who were bound to disagree. A whole series of proposals were aired, including one idea that the island be divided into two: an eastern French municipality based on the city of Montreal and an English one on the West Island, centred on Pointe Claire (Sancton 1985). The final report contained complicated compromise proposals, including an unpalatable extra layer of government, and consequently no actions were taken. The net result in fact was that the island's suburban municipalities felt so threatened by the situation that they formed an Inter-municipal Coordinating Committee, the precursor of today's Conference of Suburban Mayors, to fight jointly in their battles with Montreal or Quebec.

Before the Blier report was released, the City had gained the blessing of the province to undertake a regional planning exercise, "Montréal Horizon 2000" (Ville de Montréal 1967; Guay 1968). The plan covered an area roughly 40 km. in diameter from city hall, covering much of today's Greater Montreal Region. While it was never implemented since there was no machinery to do so, it had a strong symbolic effect, particularly as through these years, Drapeau had made a strong pitch for "*une île, une ville*" ("one island, one city") (Bédard 1965). The only progress he made in this field was the annexation of three municipalities in financial straits, Rivière des Prairies (1963), Saraguay (1964) and Ville St. Michel (1968). The former municipality of Rivière des Prairies, running along the north-east shore of the island, is physically separated from the City, a very odd situation.

Meanwhile, the provincial government launched a program of amalgamations with a view to reducing the great number of small municipalities, which were considered inefficient. Around the major cities, suburban growth was proceeding apace, and attention was drawn to the scattered nodes of

uncoordinated suburban development on Île Jésus, a situation examined by the Sylvestre Commission (Commission d'étude sur les problèmes intermunicipaux de l'Île Jésus 1964). In a surprise move, the province forced the fourteen municipalities into amalgamation in 1966 to create the single municipality of Ville Laval, thus demonstrating that the government could act if need be. It is not clear, however, that this move saved taxpayers much money (Sancton 2000a).

At the same time, studies had been proceeding to bring the administrative districts used by the province into line (Girard 1967). Until then, each department had been using its own self-defined regional divisions. In 1966, these were standardised. The *Région administrative de Montréal* was enormous, stretching from the Ontario and US borders up to Mont Tremblant. Later it was to be divided into three parts, and still later, into five.

The defeat of the liberals in 1966 and the return of the *Union nationale* under the leadership of Daniel Johnson led many observers to fear that the *Révolution tranquille* was over. However, most of the reforms started in the early 1960s continued. The year of the Expo 67 World Fair saw the creation of the *Office de planification et de développement du Québec* (OPDQ), founded to promote economic and social development planning throughout the province in collaboration with local *Conseils régionaux de développement* (CRD), Regional Development Councils. In the region of Montreal, an OPDQ office was established which did much useful work in data gathering, forecasting and analysis but had no powers of implementation. No CRD was initially established for Montreal. In 1970, an attempt was made to set up a *Commission de développement de la région de Montréal* (CDRM) to handle the special development projects being undertaken in tandem with the new international airport at Mirabel. This commission had a short life, fraught with difficulties and political infighting, and was disbanded in 1972.

By the late 1960s, the department of Municipal Affairs became interested in the French model of *communautés urbaines*, upper-tier, indirectly elected governments, as a possible solution for inter-municipal conflicts. In June 1969, plans were tabled for the creation of such communities in Montreal, Quebec City and Hull, but there were such strong reactions against the idea, especially by the City of Montreal, that the plan was postponed for one year. Then, on October 7, 1969, following months of agitation, a devastating strike by the police force of Montreal pushed everyone into action. Just three months later, on January 1, 1970, the urban communities came into being, largely as a way of sharing the costs of demands made by the police force.

The governing council of the Montreal Urban Community (MUC) consisted of the mayor and councillors of the City of Montreal and one delegate from each of the then twenty nine other municipalities on the island, with voting weighted according to the population represented. The City also had seven of the twelve seats on the Executive Committee, and provided the first chairman, the influential Lucien Saulnier. The MUC was assigned responsibilities for police,

real estate assessment, water and sewerage, garbage, planning and public transportation, services financed by property taxes to be collected by member municipalities. Later it took on regional parks and some other functions. The police forces on the whole island were amalgamated by 1972 (Benjamin 1975).

The *Union nationale* also showed interest in the rapidly expanding South Shore, and again a study was undertaken. Rather than propose a regional government, the Lemay Commission recommended that the area be restructured into three large municipalities (Commission d'étude sur le réaménagement municipal de la rive sud 1968). The population of this area already totalled 300,000, and it was hoped that partial amalgamation, undertaken early enough, would help to avoid the difficulties being experienced in Ville Laval, where the forced fusion of fourteen local governments seemed to be causing endless friction. Some municipalities did amalgamate at this time, for instance Longueuil and Jacques Cartier, and St. Lambert and Preville, and eight of them obtained a common *Commission de transport de la rive sud* (CTRS). But for the most part there was little change despite heated debates that continued well into the 1970s.

The Liberal government of the first half of the 1970s continued its attempts of a decade earlier to find appropriate responses to suburban sprawl and municipal fragmentation. In the early 1960s, it had appointed the La Haye Commission to examine the problems of urban and regional planning, but was out of office before the commission reported (Commission provinciale d'urbanisme 1968). In the 1970s it appointed the Castonguay Commission to study the problems of urbanisation, its leader having previously headed the enormously influential Commission on Health and Welfare (Groupe de travail sur l'urbanisation 1976).

However, it was the *Parti Québécois* government, elected in 1976, that finally spearheaded major municipal reforms. First it passed an agricultural zoning act, which decreed that all good agricultural land be preserved for farming (Assemblée Nationale 1978a). The zoning, based on bio-physical studies made by the Ministry of Agriculture, and negotiated with each municipality, essentially designated a perimeter of urbanisation for each settlement and agglomeration, including enough space for urban expansion for the next twenty years at the then current rates of population growth (Glenn 1980). Then it reformed municipal financing by abolishing local school taxes -- schools were to be financed entirely from general provincial revenues -- and giving that taxing power to the municipalities, a move that essentially doubled their local revenue potential. At the same time, almost all conditional grants and subsidies to municipalities from the province were abolished. It was then considered that municipalities were well placed financially, with secure regular revenues, to undertake long-range planning.

At this point, the Act Respecting Land Use and Development was passed, the first compulsory planning legislation in the province (Assemblée Nationale 1978b). The act combined local planning (*urbanisme*) and development planning (*aménagement*). Its major purpose was to provide an apparatus for long-range

planning through the creation of Regional County Municipalities, a completely new feature on the local government scene. The first principle underlying the formulation of the law was the recognition that planning is a political act and not simply a technical process. To this end, municipalities were to group themselves together to form MRC's, using as a criterion the notion of affinity -- whether in terms of work, shopping, school or recreation --, thus propagating the idea of urban-centred regions. This process was gradually achieved through consultation and negotiation until the 1500 municipalities of Quebec were grouped into 93 MRCs.

In the Montreal metropolitan region, 12 MRCs were formed (Ville Laval is also considered as an MRC), making with the Montreal Urban Community a total of 13 planning authorities. The MRCs were given seven years from the passage of the Act to constitute themselves, to decide on their system of representation and decision-making, and to prepare a development plan. Once the general development plan was approved, each member municipality had two years in which to prepare and adopt a detailed plan within the framework of the regional scheme. Other obligatory duties of the MRCs include managing the property tax registry, rural county roads, watercourses and solid waste disposal. Some MRCs have assumed further functions as time has passed.

While the MRCs received much freedom in the preparation of their plans within the framework laid down by the planning act, they were also subject to government advice. Each MRC received a written outline of the government's policies for its territory and of the projects that the province intended to implement. For the region of Montreal, these were supposedly drawn up within the framework of an overall development plan prepared by the OPDQ in 1977 (Office de planification et de développement du Québec 1977). In words, if not in deeds, Quebec was committed to an anti-sprawl policy. In 1978, it made public its "*Option préférable d'aménagement pour la région de Montréal*" whereby it allegedly committed itself to halting urban sprawl off the Island of Montreal, to enhancing the quality of life on it, and to redeveloping older urban areas in Montreal, Longueuil and Laval (Léonard 1978). The government officially renewed its commitment to this "preferred development option" in 1984 (Gendron 1984) and has pledged its commitment to it many times since.

By means of this overall policy, the MRC plans were supposed to fit into a coherent pattern. But this approach has been judged an abysmal failure. Researchers have shown how the government directives to local officials became less and less precise through the years, how infrastructure development continued to facilitate suburban development (although freeway building was stopped for a while), how agricultural zoning failed to halt sprawl, and how little attention has been paid to the rehabilitation of inner city areas. This miscarriage of policy-making may be attributed to the unwillingness of the provincial government to dictate planning decisions to municipalities and to its inability to forge agreement among its own ministries (Charbonneau et al. 1994). Further, the difference in tax rates between the municipalities on the Island of Montreal,

members of the MUC, and the other municipalities in the region encourages sprawl: for similar houses off the island, property taxes are almost half those on the island.

By the mid-1980s, the municipalities of Quebec had adjusted to the new system of Regional County Municipalities, but many observers were concerned about the future. Were the MRCs the forerunners of possible municipal amalgamations? What were the implications of the global turn towards neo-liberalism and of the trend towards decentralisation and privatisation of municipal services? What government programs would be downloaded and to whom? Were the major cities of the MRCs bearing a disproportional share of the costs of providing services? In fact, what was the future of municipal government?

The Union of Quebec Municipalities launched its own enquiry into these and other questions in 1985, the first time in Canada that municipalities had set up a major commission on their own. Chaired by Jacques Parizeau, who was later to become head of the *Parti Québécois* and provincial premier, the recommendations covered almost every aspect of municipal life (Commission d'étude sur les municipalités 1986). In the context of this paper, the principles under which they were formulated are perhaps the most telling. First was the observation that no matter how many times Quebec had devised programs to reduce the number of municipalities through amalgamations, others had popped up for one reason or another, and that the government might as well cease trying, since evidently local autonomy is a particular characteristic of Quebec life. In the same vein, the need for increased municipal autonomy was emphasised, as was the fostering of participatory democracy and the reduction of controls on municipalities by the provincial government. It was deemed important to recognise that each municipality is different and that senior government programs are not equally applicable to all.

The economic downturn of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and especially the high rate of unemployment in Montreal, caused great concern. A government study into possible remedies for the situation, entitled "Change Today for Tomorrow" and published in December 1991, identified three major obstacles to recovery: the difficulty inherent in achieving a concerted approach by stakeholders in all sectors, the absence of a regional vision for Greater Montreal, and the then current demographic and investment trends which were seen to cause a decline and impoverishment of the centre. The regional question was back on the public agenda (Ministère du Conseil exécutif 1991).

The Minister of Municipal Affairs, Claude Ryan, responded by striking a Task Force on Greater Montreal under the chairmanship of Claude Pichette. Reporting in 1993, its recommendations were to form a Metropolitan Regional Council that would have jurisdiction in matters of regional planning and development, economic development, the environment, culture and the arts, transportation and public safety (Groupe de travail sur Montréal et sa région 1993b). The Pichette Commission proposed the elimination of the Regional County Municipalities, the reinstatement of one single Administrative Region

and the creation of *Organismes intermunicipaux de services* for actual service delivery (one for the Island of Montreal and three for the outer suburbs, with Laval retaining its own municipal service system). The proposal, which many found “logical, coherent, and courageous” (Trépanier 1998: 105), came just before an election year, at a time when bold changes are not likely to be made. It also gave the metropolitan region “much more autonomy than the Quebec government was ... prepared to allow” (ibid.). In the end, the Pichette Report and, perhaps even more so, the Interim Report on the state of the region that preceded it (Groupe de travail sur Montréal et sa région 1993a), acquired a much greater historical than political importance.

Recent Developments

The failure of the Pichette Commission to generate government action was only partial. In 1996, the PQ government of Lucien Bouchard created a new ministry, the Ministry of the Metropolis, and named Serge Ménard, a criminal lawyer and prominent party member, to head it. On December 19, 1996, Ménard tabled Bill 92 at the Quebec National Assembly (Assemblée Nationale 1996) in order to create the *Commission de développement de la Métropole*, a metropolitan body in charge of coordination and planning (Ministère de la Métropole 1996a, 1996b). The law was adopted on June 13, 1997 (Assemblée Nationale 1997a). It was never put into effect.

According to Serge Ménard, Bill 92 was the expression of the collective will of the region as signified at the “*Forum de consultation*” that he had organised in Montreal in November 1996. In fact, the position papers submitted on that occasion, like those presented in March 1997 during the parliamentary hearings on Bill 92, show a clear lack of agreement on what the problem is and on how to tackle it (Léveillé 1996). The written statements issued by municipal and supra-municipal entities, public and para-public agencies and socio-economic groups, the transcripts of parliamentary debates and the stories in local newspapers all reveal that the conflict over metropolitan governance is expressed as much in the diagnostic of what ails the region as in the cures that variously situated actors would like to apply (Assemblée Nationale 1997b; Fischler 1999).

Ménard’s proposal to create a regional planning body in charge of transportation, land-use, and environmental planning was inspired in large part by the assessment of the Pichette Commission (Groupe de travail sur Montréal et sa région 1993a, 1993b). The Ministry of the Metropolis defined the principal challenges of the region as follows:

- ▶ *la vitalité de l’économie métropolitaine ;*
- ▶ *une croissance urbaine équilibrée et un cadre de vie fonctionnel et viable*
- ▶ *un développement social harmonieux ;*
- ▶ *l’organisation efficace et le financement équitable des fonctions métropolitaines.* (Ministère de la Métropole 1996a: 5)

These metropolitan challenges did not strike all participants as equally in need of urgent or drastic action. For some, in particular the representatives of North-Shore suburbs, the problems at hand were not metropolitan but local in nature. In Blainville and other growing municipalities on the periphery, things were actually fine, and intermunicipal competition was a positive factor of development. For the City of Montreal, the problems were acute and they were truly metropolitan in nature, in part because of municipal fragmentation (Ducas and Trépanier 1998).

Despite the discord, a limited consensus did arise on two points. First, some form of regional coordination could be useful in order to ensure the international competitiveness of the metropolitan area. Thus, a large number of actors subscribed, with varying degrees of enthusiasm or reluctance, to the creation of Montréal International, a public-private organisation that markets the region in the world, and of the *Agence métropolitaine de transport* (AMT), a “cooperative decision-making body” in charge of public transport planning (*Agence métropolitaine de transport n.d.*). Created at the end of 1995, the AMT has independent sources of income (\$30 per car registration, a 1,5¢/litre gasoline tax and a cut on property taxes of 1¢/\$100 evaluation), but it must follow the policies set by the Quebec Minister of Transport.

The second point of consensus is that the central city owes its financial difficulties at least in part to a mismatch between fiscal revenues and service load which is due, for instance, to the servicing of facilities that are regional in scope (e.g., Olympic Stadium, Biodome). The need to strike a new “fiscal pact” between the city and the provincial government has been clear to all for a long time. Because dealing with this problem does not entail tinkering with jurisdictional prerogatives, fiscal reform has been high on the political agenda, both locally and provincially. In 1996-1997, driven by its desire to get rid of its budget deficit, Quebec came to see the fiscal deal with Montreal as part of a larger effort, the reorganisation of municipal finances throughout the province in a manner conducive to the downloading of responsibilities. This is why the latest push for the reorganisation of the Montreal region, including the creation of institutions of metropolitan governance, has come from the National Commission on Local Finances and Fiscality.

One may say that this commission cost Quebec municipalities \$375 million per year over three years. The provincial government promised to set it up in October 1997, when it exacted this contribution from the cities to the reduction of the provincial deficit.¹ In April 1998, the Bédard Commission was given the mandate to draw the outline of a new fiscal pact between the two levels of government, in particular to study the sources of revenue available to municipalities, to examine ways of furthering the decentralisation of

1. A new fiscal pact does end this imposed contribution.

governmental responsibilities, and to consider “*la situation particulière de Montréal*” in that respect (Commission nationale sur les finances et la fiscalité locales 1999: 1).

The fiscal problem of municipalities, as defined by the commission, is not the race of the province to get rid of budget deficits and to devolve responsibilities onto local levels of government. It is the fact that meeting the challenges posed by globalisation, economic specialisation and social diversification calls for new modes of governance at the local and regional level. Municipalities are seen as ill-equipped to meet these challenges because they are held to be often too small, too inefficient, and too prone to competing rather than collaborating with each other. Montreal itself is also burdened by the extra costs associated with having older infrastructure, great social needs, regional facilities, suburban competition, questionable management practices and an expensive labour-force. And the Montreal region as a whole suffers from jurisdictional fragmentation and the lack of a common vision.

The recommendations of the Bédard Commission flow naturally from its assessment of the situation. They include the institution of mechanisms of regional decision-making, the enlargement of Regional County Municipalities, which would be called on to deliver a wider range of services, and the merger of municipalities throughout the province, including on the Island of Montreal. This last recommendation is arguably the most controversial. It goes against the findings of the Parizeau and Pichette Commissions, which de-emphasized amalgamations, and it threatens the dearly held local autonomy of the province’s 1300 municipalities.

With respect to Montreal and its suburbs, the goal of amalgamation is not so much to achieve economies of scale (a valid rationale in the case of tiny municipalities) as it is to reduce the number of players in the region (from 111 to a maximum of 20) in the hope that collective agreements will be more easily reached. For the Island of Montreal itself, three scenarios are laid out; they entail the reduction of the number of cities from 28 to 1, to 3, or to 5, respectively. It is that specific part of the report that received most attention in the media, at the expense of the rest. And it is the possibility of merging all municipalities of the Island of Montreal into one mega-city that caught the fancy of Montreal mayor Pierre Bourque. For Bourque is the true successor, eight years removed, of the late Jean Drapeau and an heir to his dream of extending the city’s boundaries to the circumference of the island.

If Quebec wants to gain prominence in the global, post-industrial world, the Mayor argues, it must necessarily strengthen its central cities, in particular its one and only metropolis (Ville de Montreal 1999a, 1999b; Policy Options 1996). Empowerment, in turn, requires municipal amalgamations and metropolitan governance. Bourque and other advocates of “one island, one city” often point to the experience of Toronto as a positive precedent. They present the same optimistic evaluation of the annual savings that would accrue from amalgamations as the Harris government presented before the creation of the

mega-city in Ontario (SECOR 1999; Stevenson and Gilbert 1999). While the jury is still out on the case of Toronto at the time of the writing, enough is known already to suggest that savings there will, at best, be minimal² (Sancton 2000a) and that, in general, the creation of a very large municipality may very well lead to diseconomies of scale (Vojnovic 1998). In the case of Montreal, many fear, amalgamation could spread the poor management of the City and the high cost of its work force over the island as a whole. Also worrisome is the fact that the reduction in the number of elected officials is counted in cost-benefit analyses only as a benefit (in financial terms) and not as a cost (in democratic terms).

Aside from mergers, Bourque calls for a metropolitan body, not “*une nouvelle superstructure lourde et artificielle qui ne dit rien aux citoyens*” (Ville de Montréal 1999a: 3) but of a “light” metropolitan structure. But of course, he would like his city to have a dominant position in that new body. And that would happen if it incorporated its 27 neighbours on the island. The addition of another eight hundred thousand people to Montreal’s one million residents would raise the city’s share of the regional population over the threshold of 50 % (with about 1.8 million residents out of 3.4 million). But Bourque’s two goals, municipal amalgamation and metropolitan coordination, are contradictory: elephants and mice do not make good playmates. As the European experience suggests, breaking up Montreal in several pieces may be more likely to make the suburbs willing to enter the game of regional governance (Lefèvre 1998).

According to Bourque, the realisation of “one island, one city” would also help to lessen economic, social and cultural divisions. Like most central cities on the continent, Montreal has been left poorer than its suburbs by decades of middle-class movement to outlying areas and it is now time to make the suburbs share their wealth. Critics of Bourque’s plan argue that the solution to Montreal’s woes lies in Quebec, which pays for social services, hands out various subsidies and can give cities additional sources of revenue. They also claim that Montreal, with its Central Business District, has a fiscal advantage over other municipalities, and that suburbanites in fact support the central city when they work and shop downtown.

As always in Quebec, policy debates today also pertain to linguistic differences. Francophone families make up a majority of those who leave Montreal for the outer suburbs, while Anglophones are in the majority in fifteen of the suburbs around Montreal, in particular on the West Island, and live in municipalities that are officially bilingual. Reform is attractive to defenders of French because better regional coordination may help to reduce the rate of suburbanisation of French Montrealers and because amalgamation would put a larger number of them under a Francophone municipal administration. It is unattractive to Anglophones, because it threatens the existence of many

2. In fact, news from Toronto in mid-February, 2001, showed that things were very bad.

municipalities that are officially bilingual by virtue of having fewer Francophones than non-Francophones in their populations. (The government is currently studying the possibility of granting bilingual status only if more than 50% of their residents declare English as their mother tongue.) To placate their opposition, Bourque has pledged to guarantee the access of Anglophones to bilingual services in an enlarged Montreal by creating bilingual districts. This promise has been rendered empty by the government's "white paper" on municipal reform.

Released on April 25, 2000, the *"livre blanc sur la réorganisation municipale"* explicitly rules out the possibility of an enlarged Montreal having official bilingual status, in whole or in part (Ministère des Affaires municipales et de la Métropole 2000). This clause has made resistance to amalgamations on the island of Montreal even stronger. Also, it illustrates the impact that meddling by other ministers is having on municipal and regional policy. The "white paper" is the long-awaited product of a compromise between Louise Harel, a representative of an inner-city Montreal riding who presides over an amalgamated Ministry of Municipal Affairs and of the Metropolis, and seven of her colleagues in the cabinet. This compromise strikes a balance between the likely effects of reforms on taxation, on economic development and on linguistic balance.

In contrast to Harris's heavy-handed, top-down policy on municipal affairs in Ontario, Harel's plan represents a gradualist approach to municipal reform and leaves many wrinkles to be ironed out by local actors themselves, as did the creation of the MRC's. Instead of wholesale change, of the kind outlined in the Bédard Report, the goal is incremental change on separate tracks of metropolitan governance (creation of a metropolitan body), municipal boundaries (voluntary or even forced mergers) and fiscal revenues (tax-base sharing). These lines of public action find their origin in the three main points of weakness in the current situation: suburban sprawl, jurisdictional fragmentation, and fiscal inequality. Those problems raise important barriers to sustainable development and economic competitiveness, but they also create a burden on public budgets: the existence of very small municipalities, the proliferation of special-purpose bodies, the concentration of social problems in central areas and the construction of new infrastructure in the suburbs (while existing infrastructure in older areas is underutilised) are so many sources of inefficiency in public spending.

Although this latest round of reform is generally inspired by the same motivation as previous efforts, it derives its political momentum from the will of the government to balance the provincial budget. This will has been expressed in a serious downloading of expenditures onto municipalities. If the twentieth century, overall, has seen fiscal "uploading" from the municipalities to the provinces, rather than the opposite, the 1990s have marked a reversal of that trend (Sancton 2000b). In Quebec, the burden that was added on local budgets between 1992 and 1997 totalled four hundred sixteen million dollars per year, a sum that was nearly doubled from 1998 on (Commission nationale sur les finances et la fiscalité locales 1999). At the same time, local school taxes, which

had been abolished earlier, were re-introduced to supplement educational budgets. This has only accentuated the reallocation of burdens between the two levels of government: whereas the *per capita* expenses of the province declined by about 6% between 1982 and 1997, municipal expenses per person increased by some 17% over the same period (Commission nationale sur les finances et la fiscalité locales 1999).

As a product of compromise, the new policy envisions a Montreal Metropolitan Community that does not replace existing regional bodies (the MRC's). The only simplification of government structures that Harel has proposed is a potentially nefarious one. While the 12 Regional County Municipalities (and the four Administrative Regions) off the Island of Montreal would be kept in place, the Montreal Urban Community would be abolished. Thus, the suburbs would get to keep their regional bodies, but the island would become a subsidiary unit of the Metropolitan Community. This has much to please Mayor Bourque, who sees this relative institutional void in the core of the metropolis as an opening to realise his project of "one island, one city".

The most vociferous critique of the "white paper" has come, on the one hand, from the mayors of outer suburbs, especially on the North Shore, who do not recognise the existence of metropolitan problems. They do not want their municipalities to be part of a future Montreal Metropolitan Community. Opposition has come, on the other hand, from people in municipalities large or small, who see forced amalgamations as an intolerable attack on local democracy and as an irrational policy bereft of empirical basis. Where the Minister of Municipal Affairs sees more democracy thanks to greater public involvement in regional and metropolitan affairs, her critics see less democracy because of diminished contact between residents and elected officials. Even if Quebec's special problem of linguistic difference is left out of the picture, tensions between core and periphery, conflicts between central and local governments and disagreements within the provincial government itself are more than sufficient to stall reform or to derail it.

From the Past to the Future

This historical overview of attempts at municipal reform and regional restructuring in Montreal shows that today's debates are echoes of recurrent discussions in past decades and that actions undertaken recently are only the latest attempts to deal with long-standing problems. Ever since the beginnings of suburbanisation, at the end of the nineteenth century, Montreal has tried to amalgamate newly urbanised areas; over and over again, it has taken unilateral actions that have had important impacts on its neighbours. Yet it has not been able to stop its decline relative to the rest of the region and has seen its fiscal base erode to the benefit of suburban municipalities. The policies of the provincial government have done much to facilitate these processes, even though

reforms from the 1970s, such as the creation of the MUC and the institution of MRC's, have made supra-municipal planning and service delivery part of the Quebec landscape.

Today, the provincial government seems poised to act, at last, on its numerous promises to foster new modes of regional governance. Changes in local government have always lagged behind those made in the realms of education, health and social services. The delay in municipal affairs, Divay and Léveillé claim, is due to the fact that the need for reform is not perceived as acutely and that local opposition to it is more intense (Divay and Léveillé 1981). The presence of local government reform on the political agenda in the late 1990s stems in large measure from the need to balance the province's books and to increase its economic competitiveness. Without much evidence, or even in contradiction to research findings, administrative simplification, territorial amalgamation and metropolitan coordination are presented as sources of great savings to taxpayers and as recipes for success in the global market (Sancton 2000a; Collin 2000).

Yet if higher-level governments want to foster economic growth and if city-regions are indeed becoming key players in the new economy, the former will have to share some of their power with the latter, something that they are not prone to do. The city of Montreal has remained the undisputed economic heart of the region, but the suburbs are attracting a growing share of private investment and yielding increasing political power. The central city is in a weaker political position, but it remains the object of mistrust in the periphery. Quebec needs an economically strong Montreal but a politically weak one.

The factor that makes Montreal particular among city-regions in North America is the linguistic situation and, more specifically, the relative decline of the Francophone population on the island of Montreal. Even though it wants to foster "*un sentiment d'appartenance*" at the metropolitan level, the current government evaluates the linguistic balance of the region on the basis of figures for the island alone (Ministère des Affaires municipales et de la Métropole 2000: 30). Be that as it may, the government has enlisted the discourse of anti-sprawl planning in its struggle to preserve the supremacy of French in Montreal. The linguistic issue, which sets the case of Montreal apart from other cases, has in the past limited the ability of the provincial government to effect regional governance (Sancton 1985). Ironically, it may work in favour of metropolitan governance today.

Despite this unexpected help from the defenders of French, reformers are unlikely to be very successful in stemming the suburban tide. Even though solutions are at hand to aid central cities, political realities make the record of metropolitan planning in North America and elsewhere far from encouraging (Downs 1997; Grant 1989; Rothblatt and Sancton 1998; Tomalty 1997; Williams 1999). "The overwhelming forces of metropolitan decentralisation ... may be beyond the control of regional or even national public policy" (Rothblatt 1998: 510) and the political clout of middle-class suburbs may forever surpass

that of central cities. In fact, resistance to the creation of effective metropolitan government comes at the same time from partisans of local prerogatives and from supporters of central authority, from taxpayers who want to be left alone and from activists who believe in participatory decision-making, from provincial officials who see virtue in top-down planning and from progressives who demand redistribution. The activists and progressives are more likely to be disappointed: with its downloading of responsibilities onto local entities and its dilution of democracy in mega-cities, municipal reform in Canada today lays the groundwork for a government system that works for aggregate growth rather than for equity or democracy (Vojnovic 1999; Golden 2000).

Whatever the provincial government decides to do with respect to municipal boundaries and regional structures, it must take two sets of actions. On the one hand, it must institute a tax-base sharing system throughout the Greater Montreal Region and give municipalities other sources of revenues aside from property taxes and user fees (e.g., a share in the sales tax). The problems of Montreal -- and of central cities in general -- are first and foremost (though not only) fiscal problems and they must be solved first and foremost (but not solely) by fiscal means. At the same time, it must reinvest in education and protect the social safety net. In the information society, the quality of local schools and universities is much more important to the region's competitiveness than is the size of its central city. Rather than tinker with structures *per se*, decision-makers ought to focus on programs and on their effects for residents.

On the other hand, Quebec must match its actions to its rhetoric with respect to the spatial development of the region. Contrary to its stated principles of compact urban development, the provincial government has continued to support suburban sprawl through the provision of suburban infrastructure and public facilities. The problems of Montreal, including the fiscal problem, are due in large part to suburban expansion, and Quebec must stop fueling or condoning the process. For the rest, it should improve local democracy, if need be by cutting Montreal into smaller pieces, and privilege sustainable urban forms, possibly by means of regional planning. At the time of writing, there was some movement in the areas of fiscal reform and of local democracy.

In 1982, Divay and Gaudreau reviewed the social, economic and political forces, both centrifugal and centripetal, at play in the Montreal region. To a large extent, what they wrote nearly twenty years ago is still valid today: that Quebec has often done more harm than good when dealing with Montreal, that, in the face of Montreal-suburb and suburb-suburb rivalries, regional planning will have to be imposed by the province, but that any proposal will find itself "*balloté entre les vues sectorielles des divers ministères*" (Divay and Gaudreau 1982: 189, 195). It is tempting to argue that the same verdict still applies today.

Yet there is cause to believe that the latest round of reform will deliver on some of its promises. Local officials have developed a track record of inter-municipal collaboration, the idea of regional planning has materialised in the form of the *Agence métropolitaine de transport*, the provincial budget has been

balanced, older suburbs are starting to display demographic and social characteristics typical of central cities, and all actors in the region agree that Montreal (and its neighbours) must benefit from a new fiscal pact. The glass is already partly full. Perhaps it will get a little fuller still.

Epilogue

On June 15, 2000, the Québec National Assembly passed bill 134 which created the Montreal Metropolitan Community (MMC) covering the greater Montreal region (Assemblée nationale 2000a). The MMC will be in charge of land-use planning (*aménagement du territoire*), economic development, social housing, metropolitan infrastructure and facilities, public transit and solid waste management. This administrative body, not in itself a new level of government, will be financed by contributions from the member municipalities. (It may also impose user fees, borrow money and issue bonds.) In particular, the MMC will set up a tax-sharing program that is meant to lessen competition for new construction and endow a development fund for metropolitan infrastructure and facilities. Under this program, municipalities will share a small part of their existing fiscal revenues as well as a more significant portion of the annual increases in those revenues. The MMC will be overseen by a 28-member council (with 14 elected officials from the island of Montreal, 14 from Laval, the North Shore and the South Shore, and a deciding vote for the mayor of Montreal); in Montreal fashion, it will be run an 8-member Executive Committee that meets behind closed doors. Despite its powers, it will remain under firm control of the provincial government: all metropolitan plans and policies will have to be submitted to Quebec for ministerial approval. The bitter fights that occurred at the first meeting of the MMC council, on October 30, suggest that collaboration between the island and the outer suburbs will be difficult, to say the least. In fact, tensions between core and periphery were heightened by the decision of Quebec to realise the Drapeau/Bourque dream of “one island, one city”.

By the time this volume reaches its readers, the provincial parliament will most probably also have adopted bill 170, a law that imposes large-scale mergers in the regions of Montreal, Quebec City and Hull. In the case of Montreal, all 28 municipalities of the island will be merged into a megacity of 1.8 million residents, while 8 municipalities on the South Shore will form an enlarged City of Longueuil. According to the law as it stands now, the new City of Montreal will be governed by a 71-member council, but power will in fact be centralised in the hands of the mayor and of a small Executive Committee whose members the mayor can nominate and fire at will. The new city will be divided into 26 boroughs (*arrondissements*), 9 within the existing limits of Montreal and 17 outside. Officially bilingual municipalities will retain their status in their new incarnation as boroughs, but the new city, article 1 of the law declares, *est une ville de langue française* (Assemblée Nationale 2000b: 36). The boroughs will

provide local services only (e.g. garbage removal, local parks and recreation, zoning) and will receive their budgets from the city (and from user fees); indeed, the central city will retain all powers of taxation and be the sole employer of city workers. The idea of “one island, one city” will become a reality on January 1, 2002. Thus the government will have kept its word on effecting real change in municipal structures. Still, with a highly centralised central city, small municipalities in the outer suburbs and a weak Metropolitan Community, it is far from certain that suburban sprawl will slow down and that the region as a whole will learn to speak with one voice.

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