

Reviews/Comptes rendus

Merger Mania: The Assault on Local Government. Andrew Sancton. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000, 183 pages.

Andrew Sancton has written a very useful and timely book that approaches the problem of municipal amalgamation from a *parti pris* position. Not everyone will agree with the anti-merger conclusions that he draws but all will admire the assembly of history, argument and political debate that his short book offers. Written on commission for the City of Westmount as part of Mayor Peter Trent's war against the merger of Westmount and 27 other municipalities into a mega Montreal, the book is a sharp critique of the pro merger movement. Sancton, who is an expert on local government and originally from Montreal, teaches at the University of Western Ontario.

I can well imagine that he viewed writing this book as one last opportunity to pay his debt of gratitude to the city of his youth. As a *parti pris* document, it will have been in vain however as the legislation that establishes an amalgamated and much larger Montreal which will cover the entire island has been passed this winter (2001) by the Quebec National Assembly. The leader of the official opposition, Jean Charest has committed himself to reversing it, when and if he comes to power in the next election. And it must be said that the issue of municipal amalgamation in the minds of many of its anglophone opponents -- who are not the only people opposed -- is tied up with fears of having their rights abused by the political representatives of the majority francophone community. The legislation entrenches the rights of the minority language already operational in a number of Montreal's suburbs but it will make it more difficult to expand those rights to English speaking districts within Montreal.

But I am sceptical that Charest will live up to his promise to reversing the legislation as amalgamations once they have been accomplished are difficult to reverse. I expect this will be the case in Montreal as the

city wide excitement and political renewal that accompanies the politics of the new entity become addictive to its citizenry.

In this respect despite the impressive marshaling of evidence, Sancton underestimates the role of political passion in cementing the new city into history. The dream of a united Montreal has been on the minds of its partisans for a long time. In the case of some of them who we can call committed municipal reformers, mostly social democrats and others on the left, the idea that places like Westmount and Cote Ste Luc and Dollard des Ormeaux or Beaconsfield or Outremont can stand aside in splendid isolation from the daily turmoil and social injustice that much of Montreal has suffered from while enjoying the benefits of Montreal's joie de vivre and its economic opportunities is absolute anathema.

It is no surprise therefore that despite the political risks involved, the Bouchard Government decided to make municipal amalgamation its legacy. For its partisans, a unified Montreal represents the triumph of their egalitarian ideology with one tax base, rational planning, an integrated system of libraries, recreation and cultural facilities and equitable transfer of resources and opportunities for those poorer parts of Montreal that have been starved of resources while the more affluent suburbs have built and maintained excellent libraries and recreational facilities financed by less onerous property taxes on their affluent citizens.

Of course, this stereotypical picture is not the whole truth. In any case, it hides a number of other plausible explanations for the problems that have beset Montreal including incompetent administration, the squandering of funds on the Olympic installations, provincial underfunding and sometimes selfish unions that have put the interests of their membership above that of the polity as a whole.

Sancton generally does not explore the political reasons outlined above that have motivated the reformers to advocate amalgamation. Instead, he concentrates his attention upon the rich history of amalgamation elsewhere in order to show that the promises of mega

cities including reduced taxes, more efficient administration, enhanced democracy, greater community involvement and greater rationality in the delivery of services have never been kept. He also draws upon public choice theory to argue that "there is no functionally optimal size for municipal governments because different municipal activities have quite different optimal areas" (p.74). "We need not decide whether public choice is right or wrong. The point is that it gives us good reason to at least question the consolidationist paradigm." (p.75)

He examines Winnipeg, Halifax, Toronto, several smaller Ontario cities, Laval, Quebec, New York, Philadelphia, London, U.K. and several other European jurisdictions. In each of his case studies, Sancton presents considerable evidence that the amalgamations failed to deliver on their promises. His conclusions about Winnipeg's Unicity experiment is typical

"In 1972, Winnipeg's Unicity was seen as a bold new experiment in municipal government for city-regions. It was territorially comprehensive, administratively centralized and structured politically to enhance neighbourhood involvement. In 1999, all that is left is administrative centralization". (p.63)

As a former Winnipegger who visits the city annually, my impression is quite different. The political debate and level of interest of Winnipeggers in municipal politics has never been higher. They have a young controversial reform-minded Mayor, a lively council and environmental politics is at the top of the agenda. A recent visit (winter 2001) suggested a city alive with discussion, debate and involvement in the pressing issues of the day. Its modern downtown library was filled with clients, activities and books, and its suburban branches are busy and well stocked. Property taxes seemed reasonable in comparison to Montreal and its suburbs. There are new bridges, new and attractive shopping and entertainment areas, a redeveloped riverbank and a sense of progress in the air. Some old problems like aboriginal poverty, inadequate public transportation, inadequate low cost housing for the poor, and an imbalanced central shopping district remain

unsolved despite a number of impressive initiatives that are currently underway.

I suspect despite some nostalgia for the good old days of West Kildonan, East Kildonan, St. James, Tuxedo, Charleswood, St. Boniface and St. Vital and old central Winnipeg, on the part of suburbanites, there would be few Winnipeggers who would like to end Unicity and divide the city into separate autonomous cities again.

Sancton, as befits his mandate, introduces copious evidence of failure with respect to amalgamation in the cities he examines. But most of it is difficult to evaluate. It is not enough to argue that taxes are higher, efficiencies apparently unachieved and local involvement diminished. The question that must be asked and which is not answered adequately is with respect to what?

Time has passed, cities and needs have grown. Would the taxes have not also grown in the former smaller entities as the level of need and citizen expectation of service has grown? Canada like most modern countries has become much more urbanized in the last half century. The sleepy nostalgic filled villages and small towns of our past have faded. The old culturally homogeneous nature of our population has altered beyond recognition. The Union Jacks may still flutter here and there but our British roots have largely been covered over. The almost rural local grip over our politics and social culture though still powerful is slowly but surely losing its hold. A bold new urban and urbane society is emerging. It may well have faults. Sancton's warnings with respect to the need to ensure democratic participation are vitally important.

But the days when the local establishment who shared a common vision and life experience with the blessing of those in key positions and in the know, ran everything are coming to an end. Modern mass democracy is much messier and forces people to interact with others often very different from themselves in order to bring about the creation of a new citizenry committed to a broader and frankly bolder conception of democratic life.

In the end, I suspect municipal amalgamation in Montreal and elsewhere will be a success. The key is to balance the very legitimate needs for local input and full democratic participation with the vibrant energies that can be unleashed when a new more dynamic entity is created. There will be initial bumps and bruises and growing pains but in the end the birth of these new civic places will help restore the polis. Sancton has written a thorough, very readable and well researched polemic against this point of view. Time will tell us who is right.

Harold Chorney
Public Policy and Public Administration
Concordia University