# MUNICIPAL PARTIES AND GOVERNMENTS AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS AS VEHICLES FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

by Tim Thomas*

## Introduction

Canadian municipal governments and their political parties are inadequate vehicles for grassroots political activity and policy development. Examining the urban reform movement begun in the 1960s and continued through the 1980s, we will trace the attempts on the part of urban reformers to effect social change through the level of government closest to the people. We will examine these attempts in Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Montreal where, not coincidentally, these movements were led by political parties with platforms advocating municipal reforms that would bring government "closer to the people."

These ideas achieved their greatest successes in the city of Montreal where the decentralist party, the Montreal Citizen's Movement (MCM), came to power in 1986. However an examination of the MCM's years in power reveals that even at this level, the constraints of power as well as the constraints associated with political parties (the logic of electoral competition), rendered any attempts at institutional reform or "grassroots" political reform relatively ineffective. Even at institutional levels closest to the people in settings whose political cultures strongly favour participatory democracy such as Montreal, Vancouver and Winnipeg, the political party has proved to be an ineffective vehicle for social activists who would perhaps be better suited to social movements.

## Participatory Democracy and Canadian Municipal Politics

For Canadians concerned with participatory democracy it would seem logical to abandon the non-ideological, electorally driven, brokerage parties that dominate politics on the federal and provincial levels and instead, to focus their efforts on the level of government that many believe most directly affects their daily lives. Indeed, long-time municipal activist, Dimitrios Roussopoulos, most explicitly contemplated this possible connection between participatory democracy and municipal politics when he wrote that: "The force of localism and the direct access of city politics may very well make city hall as an institution the most vulnerable to the people's rage."[1]

Nevertheless, an examination of the structure and ideology of Canadian municipal politics reveals that despite some sociological similarities, there is little evidence of any such trend, with the possible exceptions being the cities of Winnipeg, Vancouver and Montreal. For the most part, local government has tended to be regarded by Canadians as simply an administrative tool for the implementation of policy decided by more important levels of government. It has not been perceived as an effective area for any form of policy innovation or even for political change in general.

With new urban problems however, has come growth in the extent to which many segments of the populace want to be permitted a voice and

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citizens' groups arose around a variety of issues. Writing of the 1960s and 1970s, Donald Higgins observes that even though detailed knowledge of occurrences in other cities was often absent: "To the activists as well as to some less impassioned observers, there was a sense of there being an urban reform "movement" - a feeling of shared experiences and objectives."[2]

Generally, Higgins sees this urban reform or "citizen" movement in Canadian city politics as having three sets of characteristics.[3] First, there were spontaneously formed groups seeking to preserve their neighbourhoods from unwanted intrusions (expressways, high-rise/density development proposals). Included in these citizen groups were also people whose perspectives went beyond their own neighbourhoods and whose leadership tended to be more professional than the more localized and reactive groups. They advocated city-wide policy measures such as the provision of more public housing and day-care facilities, the drafting of municipal development plans, improved public transit, better protection for minorities and tenants, and more effective public participation in municipal decision making.

Second, there were an increasing number of "reform" politicians winning elections to city councils and transforming the composition of these structures by increasing their percentage of women councillors and by lowering the average age of their participants. These reform councillors were seen as having closer ties to citizen groups and possessed operational styles that emphasized consultation, public hearings, and streams of reports to the public. Some were even connected to the NDP or reformist municipal parties, a sharp break with traditional "non-partisan" city politics, and most were seen as leftists or even anarchists.

The third group making up this so called urban reform movement was the alternative press and periodicals such as *This Magazine, Our Generation* and *City Magazine*. The simultaneous emergence of all of these actors in metropolitan areas across the country with what seemed like similar messages, accounts for the use of the term "movement" to describe them. Yet there were other factors that allowed for such terminology. All of these actors seemed to share a concern for process and Higgins notes that:

> ...perhaps the one factor that has made urban group politics close to being a movement in the late Sixties and the Seventies is a broadening of what is considered "political." "Politics," it seems, is a more respectable word to apply to city government than was the case a decade or so ago.[4]

The most common kinds of policy thrusts championed by progressive urban politicians were public housing, public transit, day care, energy, and property tax reform to achieve a greater degree of equitable distribution of the tax burden within parameters laid down by the provincial government. Large segments of the history of city politics in Vancouver and Winnipeg can be seen as a struggle by organized labour to cut down the power of capital's interests relative to city hall. The experience of the Montreal Citizen's Movement (MCM) is a more recent example of that same conflict and Higgins argues that perhaps all these aspects of the progressives' orientation can be encompassed in the broader issue of democratization of the governance of the city,

> the matter of the extent to which power can be dispersed and restructured so that groups of citizens in the different areas of the city maintain an effective control of those aspects of their lives over which municipal government can have a bearing...I think that this is the best description of what real progressive urban politics is all about.[5]

Still, Higgins concludes that there has not really been a reformist movement across the politics of Canada's major cities during the late 1960s and early-to-mid-1970s and to think this way is misleading and harmful to those trying to understand what happened. He concludes that the localness of progressive urban politics not only between cities but even within them, is noteworthy:

> Whether of the elected politician variety, the community group variety, or in terms of the media, progressive urban politics is so far from being uniform in direction, pace of evolution, strategy tactics, kinds of personalities involved, content and so on, that to think of it at all as a movement is misleading and not particularly helpful to those who wish to understand and learn from what has happened.[6]

## Winnipeg

Higgins concludes of Winnipeg that by the end of the Seventies there was little left of the reform movement, either electorally or in the form of organized community groups."[7] Furthermore, this was true in spite of the fact that the City of Winnipeg Act (1972) was hailed as the most significant initiative taken to reform municipal institutions. There was to be one council, one tax base, and a unified administrative structure while Community Committees made up of three or four councillors were created to counter any effects of over centralization and to supervise zoning and planning initiatives. Furthermore, to guarantee a sufficient degree of local control by private citizens, each Community Committee area was to have a Resident Advisory Group (RAG) which was to consist of annually elected Resident Advisors who were to meet regularly with councillors and tender advice on matters of local concern.[8]

What ensued, however, was far from what the Act had envisaged. With respect to the attempts to decentralize and democratize local governments, the resident advisory system was found to be useful but played a minor role in city government and in no way provided an effective counterweight to the centralized administrative system. Although the resident advisory system had at times provided an arena for local activists to stop local developments perceived as detrimental to their communities, the RAGs were moribund in the suburbs and on larger region-wide issues, the impact of the local decision-making units was far less successful.[9]

Surprisingly few councillors emerged out of involvement in the RAGs. Instead, progressives in Winnipeg relied on a strategy that was not only purely electoralist "(once it became clear that the RAGs themselves had so little institutionalized power as to be almost irrelevant), but an electoralist strategy that was basically of the top-down variety."[10] Rather than using the RAGs and initiating reform from the grassroots, instead Winnipeg progressives pinned their hopes on the career aspirations of Lloyd Axworthy, now a Liberal MP and cabinet minister. Axworthy was perceived as a type of "saviour from above" but when it became apparent that he was not interested in becoming the city's mayor, much of the momentum for municipal reform had been lost.

Dickerson et al. assert that because local governments tend to function without the parties or any other devices for building working majorities which can yield coherent policy, municipal politics remains an ineffective area for substantive policy change and is only useful for piecemeal problem solving related to specific issues.[11] Even in Canadian cities such as Winnipeg that have avoided such patterns and have implemented competitive party structures, the drive to reform municipal government has been short-lived and municipal politics has tended to be propelled by the popularity of certain issues or individuals. Furthermore this has often occured at the expense of the libertarian, ideological concerns, and desires for "grass-roots" policy innovation that can be witnessed in the Montreal context. The case of Vancouver best demonstrates this fact.

## Vancouver

When problems of urban growth and its social effects were becoming apparent in Vancouver, two events in 1967 served to facilitate communication between a variety of disaffected groups in the city. The first was the election of Mayor Tom Campbell who came to personify the private profit motive in civic development and an anti-intellectualism and contempt for citizen participation.[12] The second was the attempt by Vancouver's Board of Administration and council to proceed with the construction of a proposed freeway which was objected to by an unlikely mix of downtown business and professional people, ratepayers in affluent areas, planners and architects, teachers and UBC academics, community workers and low-income neighbourhood and youth groups.

Organizations were soon formed to represent these constituencies, "The Electors Action Movement" (TEAM) and the "Citizens Council on Civic Development" (CCCD), both of which were motivated by opposition to the freeway and other development projects. "Citizen participation" became the watch-word and was perhaps the most salient positive goal of the new reformers. Paul Tennant writes that TEAM and CCCD were reform groups of the "city beautiful" variety, seeking to change certain policies but remaining conservative in their desire to protect that which made their city a pleasant place to live and raise a family.[13]

Later in 1968 however, TEAM was joined in its opposition to the Board of Administration and council by a second new civic party, the Committee of Progressive Electors (COPE), which was explicitly

socialist and which sought not to preserve and protect but to reduce or destroy middle-class control of the city. Despite the fact that COPE and its lone city councillor, Harry Rankin, would eventually come to oppose TEAM bitterly, the years of 1968 to 1972 were exciting ones for TEAM and COPE and were marked by public controversy and the successful defeat of not only the freeway proposal, but many similar development projects. Nevertheless, Tennant observes that:

> ...the tremendous energy required to organize and maintain the opposition to the developers, to the bureaucracy...could not be carried on indefinitely. Because of their success and their exhaustion the various citizens' groups faded away or, like CCCD, lapsed into routine activities...the politically inclined of the citizen reformers gravitated largely to TEAM to continue the battle directly...It was thus the case that TEAM grew while the citizen's groups declined.[14]

Consequently, by the time TEAM finally did achieve power in 1973, citizen reform energy was fading and municipal politics in Vancouver was beginning a return to normalcy. Furthermore, COPE, which had joined with TEAM to oppose major development projects of the previous administrators, now saw little reason for co-operation and began its previously cited opposition to TEAM.

Nevertheless, the TEAM victory did result in significant transformations in the composition and style of the city's municipal council. Tennant writes that few, if any, other cities with open elections have ever produced a council of such high occupational and social status. All of the eleven had university degrees, eight had pursued post-graduate studies, and four were university professors. The TEAM members of council were on average more than a decade younger than their predecessors and the previous dominance of business interests had been transformed into dominance by those in professions having no business interests.[15] Parallels can be made with the case of the MCM councillors who brought similar educational and professional characteristics to Montreal's city hall.

During its first years in power (1973, 1974), TEAM did work to implement much of the party's policy platform and neighbourhood participation in local area planning was encouraged. The former secrecy of the development process was reduced and for the most part, the system is undoubtedly much more open than the previous one, but also more subject to delay and personality conflict. Most elected members maintained their party affiliation after elections but party discipline was not highly developed and the increasing presence of Independents on council overtime has marked less a weakening of the party system than it has the splintering of TEAM.[16]

The number of nominations of candidates from ethnic minorities in all three parties rose sharply and TEAM (like the MCM) nominated and had elected many more women than any other party. The secrecy and power of the senior bureaucracy was reduced but Tennant argued that:

> In the two remaining areas --those of beliefs about the nature of the city itself and about citizen participation --there has been less change...The city is viewed less as a corporate whole than it was previously, but full recognition of neighbourhoods, as only the ward system would allow, continues as a dubious prospect. Most TEAM council members came to office favouring the partial ward system, but once in office they tended...to see increasing wisdom in the at-large system which brought them to office.[17]

Tennant concludes that "Vancouver's politics...has been the politics of the middle class. Full participatory democracy remains as illusory in Vancouver as in any other Canadian city."[18]

Local control, so much a part of libertarian philosophy, has been avoided by Canada's cities and even in instances when it has become a concern such as in Winnipeg or Vancouver, its existence has been short-lived and has been dependent upon individuals and especially upon short-term, piece-meal issues such as opposition to development projects. Once these issues have been resolved, the emphasis on "participatory" politics subsides.

## Montreal

Given these observations pertaining to Winnipeg and Vancouver, Montreal appears unique due to the relative permanence of its left-libertarianism and the desires of its social movement constituencies to use municipal government as a means of "de-centring the state" by actively involving citizens in issues that impact upon their daily lives. This fact is admitted even by Higgins who writes:

> As well as intractable disputes over questions of long-term objectives, there are equally intractable disputes over basic strategy, and the strategic issue of an electoral versus a grass-roots mass organizing strategy came into sharper focus in debates within the MCM than in any other progressive group I have encountered in city politics. But the issue applies to cities other than just Montreal.[19]

In the Montreal context, reformers are concerned with process and are not solely issue driven or controlled by established social democratic parties. Concerns for participatory democracy are much more firmly imbedded in municipal politics and represent the philosophical under-pinnings of a considerable proportion of its municipal candidates. This is made evident by the fact that even in the later years of the MCM's term in power, when its left-libertarian, anarchist elements felt ignored by the party, this faction had sufficient strength and support to form two of its own parties to run against the MCM in Montreal's municipal election of 1990: the Democratic Coalition and Ecology Montreal.

The strength of left-libertarianism and concerns for participatory democracy in Montreal is perhaps attributable to the preponderance of urban social movements and community groups within the city which Pierre Hamel notes, distinguishes Montreal from anywhere else in the country:

> This organizational and ideological diversity can be explained by the abundance of these movements in the Montreal context. More numerous, strong and dynamic than those of other cities in Quebec or the country as a whole, the urban movements of Montreal have successfully mobilized thousands of citizens around problems that affect the daily existence and the quality of life of populations residing in popular districts of the city.[20]

Consequently, it can be safely concluded that Montreal's left-libertarianism and decentralist orientation are not part of a trend common to Canadian municipal politics in general. Yet even in Montreal, a strong case can be made that the efforts of the MCM and its activists failed to lead to the implementation of the active, participatory form of politics originally envisaged.

From 1970-1974, although greatly disorganized, two main forces of opposition surfaced in Montreal to confront Mayor Jean Drapeau and his ruling Civic Party. The first force contained the remnants of FRAP, a political party that Drapeau destroyed by associating its leftist elements with those responsible for the October Crisis of 1970. These former FRAP supporters, devoted to attacking Drapeau's failure to provide sufficient housing and social services, merged with a middle class movement dedicated to stopping uncontrolled development in downtown Montreal, to form the Montreal Citizens' Movement in 1974.

> Upon its founding in 1974, the goals of the MCM were vaguely socialist and explicitly decentralist. Its program stressed popular participation in decisions, which reflects its own decentralized structure.[21]

Clearly the MCM had been born with a broad support base which entailed an alliance between political and social groups whose relationship was diverse and conflicting. Consequently, the MCM avoided attempts to clarify policies that might lead to confrontation within its membership and instead, its program of 1974 projected a series of reforms intended to decentralize administration by dispersing decision-making powers throughout the city's neighbourhoods.[22]

Between 1976-1978, the MCM attempted to rid itself of divisiveness and internal inconsistencies by adopting a more socialist stance. The 1976 congress adopted a plan to bring together politicized citizens to resist the way capital was transforming their areas.[23] One out of every three platform points was oriented around long-term social change through the mobilization of active popular support. Ironically, the 1978 elections were a disaster for the MCM and it seemed as though the people of Montreal, who had recently experienced the coming to power of the Parti Québécois at the provincial level, did not wish to risk further change by rejecting the stability and authority of the Drapeau machine.

The socialist, ideological phase of the MCM had been discredited and the period in opposition between 1978-1986 marked the biggest shift in MCM policy; electoral success was in sight and goals began to change. In 1978 there was not a single administrator, business person, or manager presented as a candidate, but by 1986 at least one out of every five MCM candidates came from these occupational categories. While the Civic Party instituted its own reforms between 1982-1986, the new MCM leader, Jean Doré, advocated a more laissez-faire

philosophy. He attempted to establish legitimacy in business circles, but continued to stress the MCM's traditional themes of citizen consultation and increased participatory democracy.[24]

It was not until a full seventeen months after it had swept to power winning all but three seats, that some key issues were to arise that would transform the attitudes of many Montrealers concerned with enhancing citizen input into the governance of the city. The political turmoil involving these issues seemed to confirm the fears of the growing number of dissident councillors within the MCM that the party was becoming oligarchic at the expense of its "movement" constituencies and was no longer the party that it had claimed to be.

## Overdale

The Overdale affair revolved around the issue of tenant's rights versus developers and it, more than any other, symbolized how far the MCM had deviated from its founding "raison d'être." The MCM had always perceived of itself as being an organization for the people, the citizen, rather than big capital, big business, big government, big anything. It was its duty to protect the citizen who did not possess equal institutional resources, from the awesome power of organized capital in municipal politics. This was central to both its leftist and libertarian heritage.

Indeed the political culture of the MCM had congealed during the Milton-Park struggle of the early nineteen-seventies when more than 600 low-income households formed the Milton-Park co-op to fight a plan for their relocation by a developer in exchange for the destruction of their community. The houses were scheduled to be demolished and replaced by high rises for "the middle-classes on their way back from the suburbs, and for affluent young professionals."[25] With the help of MCM activists such as John Gardiner[26], the tenants engaged in civil disobedience and formed Canada's largest co-operative housing project at the time.[27]

Despite the hunger strikes and sit-ins, 250 houses were razed to make way for the first phase of La Cite, an enormous residential and commercial development that opened its towers in 1976. However a city by-law preventing the erection of further high-rises, an uncertain economic climate in Quebec, and the economic woes of the developers combined to put the project on hold while the remaining Victorian houses were left to deteriorate further while developers examined their options. Residents rallied under the Milton-Park Citizens' Committee, and Heritage Montreal began exploring ways of buying the remaining properties and returning them to residents as cooperatives.[28]

Finally, in 1979 the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation bought the properties for $5.5 million and sold them for cost plus interest ($7 million) to the Société d'Amélioration Milton Parc (SAMP), a non-profit group set up by Heritage Montreal. Eventually ownership would be transferred to the individual co-operatives administering the buildings.[29]

The Milton-Park issue had become a rallying point for many of the MCM's founding activists and made for some very heady times that would not be forgotten by most of them. This was true even by the late nineteen-eighties when the Overdale situation arose. As a consequence, the dislocation of the tenants of Overdale in favour of a suspect plan by developers to build luxury condos was what Peter Wheeland has termed: "the antithesis of what many activists had fought for over the years."[30] Indeed the Milton-Park struggle of the early seventies had helped define and clarify the MCM's role on the municipal scene and many parallels could be made with the Overdale situation. Both instances involved tenants rejecting proposed relocation schemes in exchange for the destruction of their communities and the Overdale tenants, like those of Milton-Park almost two decades earlier, developed mutual solidarity, a real sense of community and significant outside support.[31]

Ironically, it was executive committee member John Gardiner, a former Milton-Park veteran, who was forced to defend the MCM administration during the Overdale saga. Gardiner argued that getting the developers to build the municipally-owned replacement housing was a major achievement and there was no other way to protect the tenants. He claimed that without such a deal, the landlord could have bypassed the City using the rental board to evict tenants temporarily for major renovations while raising their rents far beyond their ability to pay. Gardiner also insisted that the City repeatedly tried unsuccessfully to buy the Overdale buildings. Still, the sight of the police breaking down barricades and dragging out the resisting Overdale tenants in the Spring of 1988, was, understandably, more than many MCM veteran activists could bear,

especially those familiar with the Milton-Park struggle.[32]

## The Queen's

The demolition of the Queen's Hotel was difficult for MCM veterans as well and, as was the case with Overdale, this event reminded them of the unpleasantries of an earlier period. Just as the Milton-Park episode had galvanised the initial leftist and libertarian support for the MCM, the destruction of the Van Horne mansion had done the same for the "city beautiful" elements within the MCM who were concerned with architectural preservation. Many early MCM activists were people living in the downtown area of Montreal who abhorred the Drapeau administration's propensity to think nothing about wiping out large portions of the city's architecture and heritage. These activists deeply resented the destruction of many of Montreal's beautiful old buildings only to replace them with ugly cement projects such as the Décor Decarie shopping mall.

At no time was this resentment more evident than in 1973 when the Drapeau administration permitted the demolition of Montreal's magnificent Van Horne mansion once located on Sherbrooke Street. After that event, however, Montreal's old buildings fared rather well until the MCM's decision in 1988 to condemn the Queen's Hotel to the same fate. In light of the Queen's demolition, the *Montreal Gazette* published an editorial entitled, "Van Horne, 1988 Style" reminding many Montrealers of Drapeau's fateful decision in 1973.[33] For many MCM activists it seemed that the MCM was once again ignoring its roots and committing the same crucial errors in judgement that had allowed it to replace the old Drapeau administration.

The Queen's was an appealing building constructed in a neo-classic style and it was unusual because it had been built out of red, Scottish sandstone which "provided lively contrast in juxtaposition to the Montreal greystone on buildings such as Windsor Station."[34] Located across the street from the Bonaventure (Grand Trunk) Station and just downhill from Windsor Station (the CPR station that services Montreal's core even today), the Queen's had boomed during Montreal's railroad era. With the closing of the Bonaventure Station, however, its immediate location deteriorated to the point where neither Expo'67 nor the Olympics could reestablish the building as a hotel. Even a brief attempt in 1970 to establish it as a student hostel failed.[35]

Heritage Montreal asked the provincial government to classify the Queen's in 1985 and 1988 but their efforts were destroyed by reports revealing that there had been clandestine demolition of an inside wing and the building had seriously deteriorated due to neglect of protection from the elements. On June 21, 1988, Montreal City Council approved plans for the construction of a large, two-towered residential and commercial complex that would preserve the two choice facades of the Queen's for its base. In a last minute move, the administration also required the developer to preserve the red building stones as well as some of the hotel's "sculptural" elements and in the fall of that year the Queen's Hotel was demolished.[36]

Although the Queen's affair was less damaging to the new administration than Overdale, it raised basic questions about preservation, a fundamental MCM policy area. Luther Allen concludes that just as Overdale implied the need for a new housing policy, the Queen's demonstrated the need for selective and effective policies to protect heritage property from years of neglect.[37] The affair also contributed to a disillusionment with the administration on the part of tenants and heritage groups or the "city beautiful" elements of the MCM support base. Ironically, the person who these groups held accountable for Overdale, the demolition of the Queen's, and for the MCM's "pro-high rise master plan," was none other than John Gardiner, a leading organizer of the Milton-Park co-operative housing project of the late 1970s who had also engaged in civil disobedience in a vain attempt to stop the demolition of Victorian housing on St. Norbert St., one of the city's earliest heritage battles. The irony was not lost on many long-time MCM activists who regard Gardiner's apparent transformation as symbolic and proof of an overall malaise within the MCM.[38]

## Matrox

Another affair led to disillusionment on the part of key elements of the MCM support base as well. The Matrox affair of 1988 involved what appeared to be the simultaneous betrayal of the environmentalists and pacifists within the party; two of the MCM's most important "social movement"

constituencies representing key segments of the party's policy orientation. The issue arose when Montreal's representatives on the Montreal Urban Community (MUC) Public Planning Commission agreed to let the Matrox company clear twenty hectares[39] of protected forest land in the Bois de Liesse park, the last stand of black maple trees on the island. The company required the land so it could expand its parking facilities after it signed a lucrative U.S. military contract ($300-million) for computer-generated simulations to be used for training.[40]

In its successful bid to influence the MUC, Matrox had sent a letter detailing time constraints, alleged financial support by the federal and provincial governments, and the number of jobs that would be created. Also included was a subtle suggestion of potential legal responsibility if the company was not granted the land and defaulted on the contract. This seemed to convince the mayor who cited the promise of 400 new jobs when the issue came to the MUC council. The mayor persisted with this argument even though just prior to the vote, Matrox's president revealed that the military contract had not been confirmed and that the contract might eventually be half the figure mentioned, and would create less than 100 jobs. Eight MCM councillors and three suburban mayors opposed the expansion while another eight abstained from the vote.[41] Ultimately, the entire event showed just how easily the MCM could be separated from some of its founding ideals and:

> For antimilitary and green-space activists alike, the name of a U.S. contractor in Montréal's West Island suburbs became a one-word milestone of the distance the MCM administration had put between itself and the citizen's groups that gave it its foothold.[42]

## Municipal democratisation

Clearly the Overdale, Queen's and Matrox episodes are symbolic of the MCM's willingness to discourage participatory democracy by ignoring the expressed wishes of its long-term supporters once in power. Even more indicative in this regard, were the processes of governance implemented by the MCM leadership. Indeed the MCM's attempts at municipal democratisation and the development of processes to incorporate the views of its "grassroots" into its policy also seemed to be ineffective despite the fact that this had been virtually the party's "raison d'être" from its outset.

In January, 1987, when the MCM named its five public committees: community development; cultural development; planning, housing and public works; economic development, and administration and finance, some councillors welcomed them as an important first step, but expressed concern that their mandate was not far-reaching enough.[43] The committees were responsible for conducting open public consultation in their specific policy areas before any major policy recommendation reached the city's powerful executive committee and then city council. Although this was an improvement over the methods of the past, these committees are not nearly as powerful as those of cities such as Toronto where "nothing is presented to city council before a committee - and citizens - get a stab at it first."[44] In Toronto, every decision that council makes gets public comment first:

> But Montreal's committees won't be like that. They were mandated to develop policy - not screen council items. Nothing binds the committees to let citizens speak about issues like routine zoning changes, the bread-and-butter of public committees in other cities.[45]

Jean Panet-Raymond writes that the Overdale affair had exposed these MCM standing committees (sometimes called commissions) as mere consultative mechanisms whose recommendations could easily be ignored by the executive committee. These committees are not allowed to deal with any bylaw of a financial nature and get their mandates from the executive as does the Consultation Bureau which is attached to the general secretariat of the city. Any city department choosing to conduct public hearings must also get prior approval from the executive and the Bureau.[46]

Executive committee chairman, Michael Fainstat, defended Montreal's committees claiming that they cannot be as extensive as Toronto's because Montreal has a parliamentary system of government in which power is vested in the executive committee (roughly the equivalent of a cabinet) and city council. The executive committee remains responsible for scrutinizing matters before they reach council and Fainstat argued that he was opposed to establishing another level of decision-making: "We're not trying to slow things down."[47] But after hearing that Montreal was supposed to catch up with the

democratization of other cities of North America, the committees were disappointing for some Montrealers and their councillors.[48]

Perhaps the most promising mechanisms proposed to achieve the objective of municipal democratization were the District Advisory Committees (DACs). The city was divided into nine districts, each with a neighbourhood advisory committee which, unlike the five public committees, was obliged to hold regular public meetings to discuss such matters as local zoning changes before they went to council. It soon became apparent to many however, that the DACs have very limited jurisdiction, they do not have any decision-making authority, and they seem to have their agendas set by the executive committee as well. Any recommendations from these committees are sent directly to the executive committee for study which one councillor stated "is worrisome in terms of what it says about democracy at city hall."[49] The DACs' composition is limited to local councillors and Panet-Raymond concludes that:

> They are not institutions where people can learn how to wield local power, as one would hope for under true municipal decentralisation...There was no overall information strategy for the population or the people working within the administration.[50]

## Dissent within caucus

The fifth issue, dissent within the MCM caucus, was probably the most fundamental and first made itself evident in the month of June, 1987, when some councillors voiced disapproval in caucus over the city's decision to purchase an $82,000 Fazioli piano. After some councillors leaked the caucus rift to the press, rules were implemented to enforce caucus "confidentiality."[51] These rules, which effectively silenced some of the MCM's traditionally vocal councillors, were justified by Michael Fainstat, chairman of the executive committee in the following statement: "There are procedures for expressing dissidence. What happens within the caucus belongs within the caucus."[52]

The issue came to a head when the dissident councillors were ostracised for expressing their disagreements on issues such as Matrox and Overdale in caucus. Dissident councillor Marvin Rotrand stated at the time that:

> Like several other caucus members, I have felt a growing mood of intolerance in past months. Some of the statements made in caucus recently by executive committee members have shown a complete lack of respect for minority opinion, and for those holding these ideas. The atmosphere in caucus has grown unacceptable intemperate...[53]

In addition, many of these dissident councillors also felt that caucus confidentiality was being used strategically to stop them from rallying the population or the MCM membership to oppose certain policies:

> Public dissent was only allowed after the caucus had reached a decision, and caucus usually only reached these decisions a few hours before city council went into session on Monday evenings. Thus the right to dissent, as Sam Boskey put it, "only exists between 5:00 and 7:00." The "gang of four" (Boskey, Goyer, Melançon, and Rotrand) were frequently targeted by motions of censure. Every media leak fed the climate of paranoia, and was automatically attributed to the dissidents. In one case, at the instigation of caucus president Sharon Leslie, they even condemned an "anonymous councillor" for having divulged a caucus discussion to the media.[54]

Jean-Hugues Roy writes that the municipal "parliamentarism" the MCM sought to introduce had unfortunate side effects the most important of which being the rigid belief on the part of many MCM-ers in what can only be called "the party line." This resulted in hostility being generated towards any councillor who disagreed with what caucus had determined to be "the party line." Roy concludes that "ultimately, for many MCM-ers, it seems the party has replaced citizens as their base of allegiance."[55]

## Fears of oligarchy

In November of 1988, long time MCM councillor, Pierre-Yves Melançon who was to later lead the Democratic Coalition, quit the MCM caucus. Melançon's stiffly worded letter of resignation accused the MCM's six-member executive committee of having corrupted the MCM's dream of greater democracy at city hall. According to Melançon, a few people within the MCM have monopolized and

centralized power to almost as great an extent as had the Drapeau/Lamarre administration,

> Sous l'administration Drapeau, les porte-paroles du RCM ont dénoncé pendant des années l'hyperconcentration du pouvoir dans les mains de certains membres du Comité exécutif. Votre administration l'a étendu à quelques mains de plus: celles des sept membres du Comité exécutif...Avec le changement de gouvernement municipal le 9 novembre 1986, des gains importants s'annonçaient pour la démocratie. Effectivement, des pas ont été faits, entre autres avec la création des Commissions permanentes du Conseil. La politique-cadre en matière de consultation aurait pu être un autre pas en avant.[56]

In the letter it was clear that Melançon felt the MCM was suffering from oligarchic tendencies that were transforming it into a cadre party. He highlighted his frustration over the time it had taken to put reforms in place and attributed this to the MCM's propensity for placing sensitive issues "under study". In the meantime, groups in need of employment equity (women and visible minorities) were losing valuable jobs and time. For Melançon this stalling was attributable to the fact that the MCM had no intentions of ever implementing reforms, particularly those related to the areas of the environment, culture, and sports and entertainment services.[57]

A week after the well-publicized Melançon resignation, a full page article appeared in *The Gazette* echoing many of his sentiments. The article, entitled, "Haunted by promises", argued that despite its promise and many promises, the MCM was frequently accused of some of the Drapeau era's failings. The article noted that the city had approved at least a dozen projects for downtown Montreal in the absence of a master plan, something the MCM had been highly critical of when in opposition. It denounced the MCM for not preserving the Queen's Hotel and one member was quoted as saying that although the MCM is a product of community groups, popular movements and ordinary people, the present administration is working primarily with the business community.[58] In her analysis of Jean Doré, Sandro Contenta of *The Toronto Star* concurred with *The Gazette* article's sentiments: "The community and social groups that helped him get elected have become his staunchest critics while the developers and businessmen who feared his coming to power now praise him."[59]

*The Gazette* article concluded with the following quotation from Concordia University professor, Andy Melamed: "The executive committee of the city has too much power, absolutely, I have a feeling that power does corrupt when you have so many councillors at city hall".[60] Although they have not been recited to perfection, Melamed's words must certainly sound familiar to those familiar with the work of Roberto Michels and his assertions of the inevitability of elitism and oligarchy in political organizations.

The day after the article appeared in *The Gazette*, a conference was held at the Institut pour une politique alternative de Montréal (IPAM). Not surprisingly, the subject of the conference was, "Le RCM au pouvoir - les deux premières années". Composed largely of social activists, academics and dissenting MCM councillors, the conference noted a growing conservatism and centralization of power within the city government.[61]

In his paper presented at the IPAM conference, MCM intellectual Stephen Block also suggested that the MCM was taking on all the trappings of a traditional "cadre-type" party including party discipline and rigid, hierarchical control over policy and the behaviour of its members. Those who resisted or acted independently, were dubbed as dissenting traitors working to the detriment of the party. Block was quick to point out that the liberty to engage in such behaviour politically, used to be the "raison d'être" of the MCM:

> New ideas within this party are almost automatically treated as threats to be defeated. The bottom line is that this party is not about a pledge of allegiance. It should be about tolerating differences of opinion which is an idea which must be reintroduced into our political culture. At risk is the party platform and the ideas and jobs of those who most truly support it.[62]

Assessing the MCM's years in opposition from 1974-84, however, Ingrid Peritz observed that the MCM had a powerful influence on both the policy and process of Montreal's municipal government during the ten-year period. With respect to process, Peritz noted that when the MCM first attended council meetings in 1974, citizens and councillors had no forum in which seriously to question the administration on important issues. By 1984 they had

obtained a half-hour councillors' question period before each meeting and citizens could address questions in writing. In 1974, only an internal auditor examined city hall's books behind closed doors yet by 1984, procedure called for an independent auditor to submit a public annual report scrutinizing the administration's operations.[63]

When the MCM first elected councillors to city hall, there were only four meetings a year which were called at the mayor's discretion and which lasted no more than one night each. Ten years later there were a minimum of ten meetings a year the most contentious of which could last as long as two weeks. Peritz also noted that after ten long years of lobbying the MCM had also obtained a budget from the Quebec government for secretarial and research staff for opposition parties. When Drapeau refused them office space in city hall, they rented an office a few blocks away.[64] Finally, with respect to the MCM's impact on municipal policy during the period, Peritz concluded that:

> The MCM, along with vocal community groups, can also share credit for improving the face of Montreal over the past decade: housing renovations have replaced rampant demolitions that scarred central city neighborhoods in the 1970s. Beautification programs have transformed nondescript areas into well-lit back lanes and mini-parks. Bicycle paths and pedestrian malls line city streets where cars once dominated.[65]

More recently, Jean Doré argued that the MCM had indeed delivered on promises to make city hall more democratic. While Drapeau used city council as a rubber stamp for his schemes, Doré pointed out that he decentralized power by establishing standing committees. He also set up district advisory committees at which residents discuss local concerns and forward them to council. But perhaps the most democratic reform was the public question period Doré established at the beginning of council meetings, at which everything from pot holes to taxes can be discussed.[66] Consider the following description of how the question period is currently being used by Montrealers:

> A rock musician shows up with his guitar and sings his question; a multiple sclerosis patient in a wheelchair, unable to speak, types his query. There are question-period regulars - cyclists seeking more bike paths and street artists seeking fewer hassles from the police - and mass turnouts for issues like property taxes and flood damage.[67]

There is little doubt that question period has certainly transformed the image if not the practice of city hall since the Drapeau era when public involvement was all but non-existent. In addition, long time MCM activist, Arnold Bennett, vehemently disagrees with attacks upon the legitimacy of the DACs and with attempts to characterize the DACs as nothing more than a "sham and a facade" because they lacked decision-making powers. Bennett argues:

> Though the DACs were a long way from true neighbourhood councils, could only recommend, and were hedged with unacceptable restrictions, they were a formidable consciousness-raising tool. Citizens could do more than merely ask questions or submit petitions at the DAC meetings; they could file *requêtes* that local councillors then had to debate publicly. Community groups quickly learned how to use this request procedure to focus debate on their issues, such as the demand for more public housing in Côte des Neiges. Individuals also used *requêtes* to cut through red tape, and force a quick resolution of problems that otherwise would have been left on the bureaucratic back-burner.[68]

At this point it would seem that although the MCM has not lived up to the dreams of its many activists who desire a more partcipatory form of municipal government, it has not done badly either and this has led many to suggest that perhaps these activists have been just a little too utopian and unrealistic in their expectations. The question remains however, how long should reformers endure the constraints that come with being in power? Certainly not to the point where their goal of a fully participatory municipal government gets postponed indefinitely as was or appeared to be the case with the MCM. Indeed, during the era of the MCM's existence when the party ideologues most feared the possibility of oligarchy, one such ideologue, Stephen Block wrote:

> The executive committee would like us to believe that the requirements of everyday practical politics leaves far less latitude for the implementation of many basic MCM policies. Perhaps. But this does not explain all or very much. For these reasons many councillors are facing a dilemma: to resign

> or remain within the party. Resigning signifies a triumph for the executive committee and its clique of loyal insiders.[69]

Such sentiments are even more explicitly stated by dissident councillor Pierre Bastien in his letter outlining his reasons for resigning from the MCM:

> Soon after the election (1986), I watched many longtime MCM activists leave, and some more recent ones; all of whom, I am sure, still share the same political convictions, but who think that our administration has renounced its principles. I remember having tried to explain to them the constraints of power, and the compromises necessary to exercise it. I was unable to convince many. Now I can say that I no longer find you convincing. For me, power was the means to realise the MCM programme. For you, the MCM was the means to exercise power. You have thrown from your path all that could compromise this power or question the rightness of your quest. Since 1989, and the nearing of the electoral deadline, MCM councillors have had to close ranks behind you, and present an image of solidarity, if they wish to hold on to their seat. This permits you to sit comfortably on your power base. You take advantage of this to clean house, separating not only those who do not roll over on command, but those who are not faithful at all times...[70]

Clearly Bastien was aware of the need to be "realistic" and to compromise ideological rigidity in the interests of future policy rewards, but his letter expresses the belief that he has been obliged to compromise his beliefs to a far greater extent than his own sense of "realism" allowed.

Some, who study municipal politics in Canada, argue that even if municipal governments were truly democratic and responsive to high levels of citizen participation, this would have little effect due to the inability of this level of government to control the key economic or policy decisions made by politicians and "far-away bureaucrats" of the provincial or federal levels of government.[71]

Despite this apparent powerlessness on the part of municipal governments and their activists, one event occurred in Montreal that could certainly serve to minimize the potential for the development of low levels of political efficacy on the part of politically-concerned municipal activists. In June of 1984, mayor Jean Drapeau was forced to hold unprecedented public hearings and eventually back down on plans for a downtown construction project. Proposed by Cadillac Fairview Corp., the developers who built Toronto's Eaton Centre, the project involved a $150-million concert hall and shopping centre complex to be built on McGill College Avenue in the heart of Montreal. The project was backed by the mayor who presented the plan to the city in April without warning but with the expectation that construction would begin in August. There had been no public consultation and no economic impact or feasibility studies.[72] The project was also backed by the Parti Québécois Government which had earmarked $30-million to pay for the concert hall. The provincial government especially liked the fact that the project would create 6,000 jobs in the first two years of its construction and 2000 permanent jobs.[73]

Given the project's powerful backing and the assumed powerlessness on the part of Montrealers to control their city's development, one would have expected the project to proceed as planned. This was not the case however and a flurry of press conferences and petitions to redesign or stop the Cadillac Fairview project followed its announcement. Among the protesters were various architectural and historical conservation societies, the MCM and MAG parties, and the media. Not expected among the objectors were the powerful Board of Trade and la Chambre de Commerce, its French-language counterpart.[74]

What Cadillac Fairview's planners had failed to take into account was Montrealer's deep attachment to their view of "The Mountain," the 500-acre wooded parkland rising behind the McGill campus which the project would have blocked. Another source of discontent was what many considered the betrayal of an earlier plan, supported by many of Montreal's most prominent architects, to turn McGill College Avenue into a 36-metre-wide, tree-lined Champs Elysee-style boulevard extending three blocks to the McGill University gates.[75] Bowing to public pressure the mayor first revised the project but continued opposition forced him to hold public debates in city hall. Non-governmental hearings were held and presided over by the chairmen of the Board of Trade and la Chambre de Commerce. Eventually the project was scrapped, lending credence to assertions such as the following by a *Gazette*

editorialist that citizen participation in the development of their city is not always futile:

> Think back to 1984, when Jean Drapeau, then mayor, was insisting on letting a private developer build a highly controversial concert hall in the middle of McGill College Ave. Because he refused to allow public consultation, a broadly based coalition of citizens held its own non-governmental hearings on the scheme. That coalition's power lay in its credibility: presiding over the hearings were two unlikely rebels, the chairmen of the Board of Trade and Chambre de Commerce. Result: the mayor withdrew the scheme...It makes no sense to leave everything to government. Passing the buck does not work. The time is ripe for citizens to exert their own pressure.[76]

## Conclusion

Problems faced by the MCM are important because for many people concerned with enacting social change at the grassroots level, municipal government may at first appear to be a logical venue for pursuing their goals. Unsuccessful attempts to affect structural and social change at the local level elsewhere in Canada led many libertarian activists to view Montreal as the last remaining opportunity to establish municipal parties as legitimate vehicles for the expression of "grassroots" or community concerns. Indeed, the rise of municipal activism and the creation of competitive party structures in Winnipeg and Vancouver had been driven more by the popularity of certain issues and individuals than by desires to democratize the governance of the city. Once the issues had subsided or key individuals had left municipal politics, municipal government in these two cities resumed its traditional role of smoothly implementing policy decided by more important levels of government. Nevertheless, the persistence of libertarian sentiment in the Montreal context and its embodiment in the MCM made this city's municipal government one of the most likely cites for a breakthrough in participatory democracy.

The case of the MCM suggests, however, that parties will always become preoccupied with organizational success (re-election) to the detriment of the logic of constituency representation, even in the most unlikely of circumstances. Indeed, Montreal was an area of considerable libertarian sentiment, municipal politics seemed the level of government closest to the people and therefore the one most subject to their influence, and a popular and loosely structured party had been formed to lead the struggle on the part of Montrealers to more directly control administrative decisions affecting their daily lives. Yet even in this very promising context, despite some positive advances, advocates of participatory democracy have experienced considerable frustration and have lost their fight for less rigid, top-down decision making. The Queen's Hotel, Overdale, and Matrox episodes highlighted the MCM's willingness to ignore and discourage the expressed desires of its long-time supporters, while the party's intolerance of dissent and hesitancy to reform the structures of power suggest a reluctance if not a refusal to democratize the governance of the city.

The most important incident in the last decade of Montreal politics - the McGill College Avenue incident - suggests that Montrealers, like much of the rest of the Western world, are learning through experience that political parties, even those closest to the people, are becoming a less important vehicle for political change. The entire Canadian local government experience lends further credence to this conclusion. Therefore, rather than involving themselves in party politics of any form, people advocating participatory democracy and social activism would be best advised not to abandon their direct personal activism, but rather, to lead by example and promote the social movement or any other methods capable of "de-centring" the state.

## Notes

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4. Higgins, 91.

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6. Higgins, 86.

7. Higgins, 90.

8. Lloyd Axworthy, "The Best Laid Plans Oft Go Astray: The Case of Winnipeg," in M.O. Dickerson, S. Drabek, and J.T. Woods, eds., *Problems of Change in Urban Government* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1980), 109.

9. Axworthy, 117-118.

10. Higgins, 90.

11. Dickerson et al., 3-4.

12. Paul Tennant, "Vancouver Politics and the Civic Party System," in Dickerson et al., 23.

13. Tennant, 24-25.

14. Tennant, 26-27.

15. Tennant, 27-28.

16. Tennant, 28-33.

17. Tennant, 34. On this point it is necessary to briefly explain the ongoing debate over the ward system in Vancouver which revolves around the fact that this system would in effect allow the neighbourhoods a form of political autonomy with respect to matters of local concern.

18. Tennant, 13.

19. Higgins, 89.

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29. "Neighborhood celebrates its rebirth," *The Gazette* (Montreal), September 23, 1983, p.A3.

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31. Bennett, 170.

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33. Luther A. Allen, "The Stones of the Queen's, Is There a Will to Preserve?" *City Magazine* 10, no. 4 (Spring 1989): 5.

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42. Weston, 144.

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44. Ingrid Peritz, "MCM report card: People feel let down," *The Gazette* (Montreal), February 9, 1987, p.A9.

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47. Peritz, "MCM report card...," p.A9.

48. Peritz, "MCM report card...," p.A9.

49. Elizabeth Thompson & Lewis Harris, "Neighborhood committee bylaw splits MCM caucus," *The Gazette* (Montreal), December 14, 1988, p.A3.

50. Panet-Raymond, 150.

51. Ingrid Peritz, "MCM caucus: Some feeling left out," *The Gazette* (Montreal), July 2, 1987, p.A3.

52. Peritz, "MCM caucus...," p.A3.

53. Evidence of the perceptions on the part of the dissident councillors that they were subjected to hostility in caucus can be found in their letters of resignation from caucus which appear in Brendan Weston and Jean-Hugues Roy, *Montréal: A Citizen's Guide to City Politics*, (Montreal: Black Rose Books Ltd., 1990), pp.152-156.

54. Wheeland, 191.

55. Jean-Hugues Roy, "Promises - The MCM's Credibility Gap," in Weston and Roy (eds.), 154-155.

56. Pierre-Yves Melançon, "ma démission comme membre du Conseil des élues et élus du R.C.M.," distributed at a conference conducted by the Institut pour une politique alternative de Montréal, November 12, 1988.

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