Citizen Engagement at the Local Level

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Introduction

The nature of Canadian democracy is constantly changing as the roles of citizens and government are redefined and their relationships to each other are reconceived. Recent trends in governance have engendered among citizens a lack of trust in political institutions and a lack of engagement in political affairs; these sentiments have resulted in what has been named a 'democratic deficit' by many scholars. This paper begins by examining various interpretations of the democratic deficit in order to determine a comprehensive understanding of the problem as it applies to the Canadian context. Not only do these perspectives point to an institutional deficit at the local level, but they also produce a set of criteria for evaluating successful citizen engagement processes. These criteria are then applied to evaluate specific institutional reforms that have been implemented at the local level in an attempt to reduce the democratic deficit. The shortcomings of these reforms reveal an additional principle necessary for genuine citizen engagement at the local level: a corresponding devolution of political power and authority. To support this conclusion, current political, structural, and financial limitations on municipal powers are detailed. Therefore, this paper argues that Canada's 'democratic deficit' can be significantly decreased by enhancing the ability of local institutions to facilitate and encourage genuine citizen engagement in the political arena.

The Democratic Deficit

The notion of a 'democratic deficit' has often been articulated to diagnose citizens' lack of political interest and engagement. Susan D. Phillips and Katherine A. Graham define the democratic deficit as an existing disparity between, on one side,

the expectations of citizens in terms of the amount and forms of their political influence and participation, and on the other, the actual practices of government institutions.[1] In this sense, they argue that the public expects to be more legitimately involved in politics than present circumstances allow.

Phillips and Graham link this deficit to the results of policies that have promoted individual rights and responsibilities at the expense of the collective needs of citizens.[2] This is encouraged, they argue, by the "customer-service revolution" that has driven government reforms in recent years.[3] For example, they claim that the individualization of citizens as consumers of government services and the corresponding "professionalization of public participation" have in fact resulted in a greater distance between government and citizens and insincere public participation processes.[4] As a result, they claim, individual citizens are isolated from and have less trust in government, thus contributing to the democratic deficit.

Henry Milner claims that the democratic deficit is most visible in the decline of youth engagement in politics and the declining electoral turnout. While these areas are not the main focus of this paper, many of Milner's arguments are relevant to understanding the roots of the democratic deficit and its potential solutions. For example, he argues that the lack of knowledge and the decline in the sense of duty both to understand and engage in politics are due to the failure to encourage civic participation as a habit.[5] He advocates education and youth programs as potential solutions; in this sense, his suggestions for potential reforms are targeted at the local institutional level and emphasize the need for citizen engagement in politics.

Michael Zurn offers a further clarification of the deficit. He says that a democratic deficit occurs when there is incongruence at either, or both, of two critical junctures: "first, between citizens and their representatives (the congruence of input and decision-

making systems), and second, between the space in which regulations are valid and the space in which social interactions are dense (output congruence)".[6] Zurn's first juncture is directly related to Phillips and Graham's definition of a democratic deficit: for instance, both imply that government policies must take citizen input into account. Therefore, this paper will argue that *genuine* public engagement, in which the results of engagement processes are taken seriously both by citizens and government, is a necessary element for reducing the democratic deficit.

The focus on local government as an arena for this public engagement is justified by the second half of Zurn's definition of a democratic deficit. In simpler terms, Zurn is claiming that a deficit occurs when the jurisdiction where rules apply does not coincide with the area actually affected by those rules in practice. Therefore, an unjustified devolution of practical responsibilities could be an example of 'output incongruence' in a federal system if it is not accompanied by parallel political authority. This is because while the rules are expected to be *implemented* at the lower level, they remain under the ultimate control of the higher level. This relates back to Phillips and Graham's claim that recent government reforms have downloaded financial responsibilities onto municipalities without granting them corresponding political power.[7] The Canadian Health and Social Transfer, introduced by the federal Liberal government in 1996, provides an example of this devolution: the federal government replaced its previous transfers for social assistance and services with a single, substantially smaller, block grant. This effectively reduced the federal government's administrative role in social housing, leaving provinces and in turn, local organizations and municipalities, to bear these burdens without corresponding financial support. As a result of moves such as this, these institutions are left without the necessary foundations to meet citizens' expectations: hence, a democratic deficit results.

This idea of a gap between expectations on local

governments and actual abilities of these institutions remains a consistent thread throughout local reform literature.[8] A democratic deficit is occurring at the local level, and institutional reform can address it.

Genuine Citizen Engagement

Leslie A. Pal supports the idea that the democratic deficit necessitates the emergence of citizen engagement processes. He claims that "the continued lack of trust that citizens have toward government" and their frustration with perfunctory consultation processes of the past have encouraged a shift from processes of 'consultation' to processes of 'engagement'.[9] The distinction between these processes is important for this paper. Pal outlines *citizen consultation* as an outdated concept solely focused on specific policy design and practical implementation processes, while he defines *citizen engagement* as a more broad discussion and exchange of values.[10] Similarly, Phillips emphasizes the evolution from simple stakeholder consultation to a focus on long-term collaborative relationships between citizens and government.[11]

This shift to citizen engagement represents new forms of interaction between government and citizens. The tools of engagement that Pal outlines, such as deliberative polling, citizens' juries and dialogue, and volunteer sector partnerships, all encourage broad discussion and engaged participation from both citizens and government. [12] Similarly, Milner advocates the open communication of opinions through strategies such as letter-writing and debate as effective ways to educate and engage citizens.[13] Therefore, an effective engagement process emphasizes extensive discussions and demonstrates new relationships between governments and citizens.

In order to meet these qualities, Phillips and Graham suggest that civic engagement processes should fulfill six criteria:

they should balance the concepts of both collective and individual citizenship, be transparent, flexible, educative, sensitive to social differences, and politically connected.[14] To expand, the first principle implies that governments should consult and consider the needs of both individuals and social groups. Transparency and flexibility require the processes of interaction to be clearly defined and adaptable to unique local circumstances. Furthermore, comprehensive deliberation should be used to encourage educated choices. Being sensitive to social differences requires recognizing and avoiding the potential for privileging certain social groups over others. Lastly, engagement processes must be genuinely supported by both citizens and government as legitimate and politically binding.

In addition to Phillips and Graham's six criteria, Pal's definition of genuine citizen engagement as a broad discussion invoking exchanges of values and interests will also be added to the list. These criteria will be used to evaluate recent attempts by Canadian governments to engage citizens in the local political process.

Practical Examples and Results

One federal and one provincial initiative were chosen for this thorough analysis. The provincial initiative took place in B.C., within the jurisdiction of land use and planning. This jurisdiction was chosen because many scholars identify it as the first and most prominent area where local government initiatives for citizen engagement have been used in Canada.[15] The federal initiative was chosen for its wide geographical application and the continued relevance of its targeted issue (homelessness in Canada). Both processes used extensive dialogue-based techniques that emphasized relationship-building as tools of engagement.

In 1992, in response to a demand for more public involvement in land and resource decision-making and policy, the

British Columbia Commission on Resources and Environment (CORE) and the Land and Resource Management Plans (LRMPs) established four regional planning processes in areas experiencing land use conflicts. Extensive public meetings, letter-writing campaigns, and roundtable discussions encouraged citizen participation in developing broad policy recommendations for land and resource use in the regions. These processes reflect Pal's shift from simple consultation to citizen engagement; they were a deliberate attempt to use the detailed local knowledge of citizens to come to a consensus on the needs of the various affected groups, and public participation was considered crucial to this initiative.[16]

In some ways, the CORE process met Phillips and Graham's criteria for successful processes of citizen engagement. By appealing to individual citizens for input on a collective issue, the process effectively balanced the concepts of both collective and individual citizenship. In addition, flexibility was achieved because the CORE processes were adapted to suit each of the four regions, resulting in separate and distinct resolutions and land plans for each local area.

However, geography professor Greg Halseth and environmental planner Annie Booth's comprehensive analysis of the CORE initiative reveals that the process failed to fulfill the criterion of being sensitive to social differences. The CORE negotiations involved 'sector representatives' (members of specific local groups with opposing interests) in an effort to ensure inclusiveness; however, these representatives ended up privileging the special interests of these groups at the expense of the general local public.[17] Furthermore, the overall process was neither educative nor transparent. Overly technical information clouded with jargon limited the ability of citizens to educate themselves.[18] Halseth and Booth also claim that people were often confused "about their roles in the process, the overall task or mandate of the process and the decision-making power allocated to the process".[19]

This reveals a further problem that emerges from the failures of the CORE campaign: the inconsistent devolution of powers. Specifically, Halseth and Booth argue that "[t]here are problems inherent in devolving participation in decision-making without devolving decision-making authority".[20] The purpose of the CORE initiative was to produce a policy *recommendation* for land and resource use in the region, which would then be communicated to the provincial government. There was no guarantee that the results of the engagement process would translate into policy; in other words, the devolution of powers to regional committees was not accompanied by the appropriate decision-making power to enforce the results of the participation process. The lack of CORE's authority was further highlighted when, in 1996, the B.C. government single-handedly terminated the process despite considerable public objections.[21]

Another example of citizen engagement on the local sphere is outlined by Christopher Leo. He uses the term 'deep federalism' to describe government actions that have gone beyond traditional federal-provincial relations to engage the local-municipal political arena.[22] An example of deep federalism is the 1999 Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI), a component of the National Homelessness Initiative that aimed to identify and encourage local solutions to homelessness. This federal initiative mandated the formation of a community plan as a binding precedent to the implementation of corresponding homelessness projects.[23] The mandated incorporation of local input fulfills Phillips and Graham's criterion of being politically connected by ensuring that the results of citizen engagement directly translate to policy.

The SCPI further fulfills Phillips and Graham's criteria of balancing the notions of individual and collective citizenship and being sensitive to social differences. Leo claims that "instead of proclaiming national policies and then trying to implement them in an undifferentiated way in communities across the country, [the

SCPI programs] contained provisions apparently designed to draw on community knowledge in determining what the particular conditions in each community were and how best to respond to them".[24] Therefore, the process encouraged individuals and social groups to communicate their local knowledge and values. In doing so, the SCPI followed Pal's idea of a shift from simple consultative processes to genuine engagement. Furthermore, the asymmetrical process also indicates its intentions of flexibility.

In order to assess the realities of these programs, Leo examines the implications of the SCPI program in Winnipeg, Vancouver, and St. John. His findings reveal that the SCPI also met the remaining criteria of being educative and transparent. Leo claims that in all three cities, local citizens were well educated on the relevant situation in their own and other communities; in turn, they successfully organized themselves to study policy options, formulate priorities, and implement corresponding programs.[25] Local implementation of policy results further ensured an accountable and transparent program.

Despite successfully meeting all of Phillips and Graham's criteria, Leo still finds fault in the overall initiative. In the end, successful housing initiatives were not implemented or even promoted as viable solutions. He says "all parties were handicapped by the fact that, though the problem to be addressed was homelessness, the creation of housing was not one of the items the federal government was prepared to fund".[26] Federal funds were provided for immediate and temporary sources of relief, such as shelters and transitional housing, but not for the affordable long-term housing initiatives requested by SCPI communities.[27] As a result, "$23.5 million in federal funds were excluded from use for the community's top priority".[28] Therefore, despite intentions of flexibility and sensitivity to local differences, the program did not follow through in practice. As a result, Leo deems the SCPI an ultimate failure: "although the federal government took a stab at deep federalism by requiring a community planning process, it did

not follow through with the necessary degree of flexibility in funding conditions".[29]

Leo ultimately determines that "the lesson to be learned here is straightforward: there is no point consulting the community if programme [sic] conditions preclude a constructive response to the consultation".[30] This echoes sentiments voiced in the failure of the CORE process, in that the necessary resources for implementing responsive results must be devolved along with the responsibility for engagement processes. To support these conclusions of the importance of devolved political authority, the perspectives of Andrew Sancton and Warren Magnusson are detailed below.

The Limited Powers of Municipalities

Both Sancton and Magnusson offer useful insights into how the limited powers of municipal government in Canada contribute to the democratic deficit. While neither specifically defines the democratic deficit, their respective arguments for the need for reform and citizen engagement imply an existing dissatisfaction with political institutions that echo the *sentiments* of a democratic deficit. For example, Magnusson believes that "Canadian democracy is thin and imperfect, in large part because we have failed to develop a set of municipal institutions that meet the need for local self-government".[31] He claims existing municipalities "are so limited in their powers and so remote from their constituents" that they are unable to facilitate effective local governance.[32]

Similarly, Sancton implies that municipalities' unconstitutional status and lack of legitimate political power has rendered them essentially ineffective as governing institutions.[33] In this way, he corroborates the idea mentioned by Halseth and Booth and Leo that the devolution of consultation powers is futile without a corresponding devolution of decision-making authority. Despite

local initiatives like the ones mentioned previously in this paper, Sancton maintains that "municipal government remains limited in its function and autonomy".[34]

As a result, Magnusson claims, provincial and federal governments have often usurped the natural political role of the municipality.[35] For example, in 1998, the Ontario government controversially amalgamated six municipalities into one large Toronto municipality despite significant opposition from municipal councils and local public opinion. This is comparable to the B.C. government's independent decision to cancel the CORE initiative in 1996, despite public outcry. Both Sancton and Magnusson lament the imposition of higher authority in local affairs. For example, Magnusson believes the city should be a venue for local self-government rather than imposed governance.[36] Similarly, Sancton believes that "municipal governments imposed from above are unlikely to take root in the communities they are supposed to serve".[37]

A lack of political power is exacerbated by the structural dispersion of power at the local level. Magnusson says that "municipalities have become so fragmented their power no longer means anything in the political system".[38] The division of power between independent local authorities such as school boards and police commissions means that no unified body exists to represent municipalities as a whole. As a result, Magnusson claims, the ability of municipal governments to speak for the electorate with democratic authority is undermined.[39] Sancton agrees: he claims that special-purpose bodies have overtaken responsibility for local initiatives so that "in most cities, the municipal government does not have direct responsibility for many important functions of government".[40] These special-purpose authorities, as well as the provincial and federal government, are often reluctant to cede political influence and thus further preclude the devolution of powers to municipalities.

In addition to these structural and political obstacles to power, local institutions also face financial constraints. The main source of revenue for municipalities is derived from the property tax, but citizen opposition to higher taxes severely limits avenues for increasing this revenue. As a result, municipalities "are often unable to respond to perceived local needs because of these limited resources".[41] Furthermore, rapid urban growth requires the development and maintenance of new infrastructures, an expense that often fall to municipalities. As a result, local governments are increasingly expected to provide more services with fewer funds. These financial concerns are exacerbated in recent times of fiscal retrenchment, in which federal and provincial cutbacks have further shifted "more responsibility and expenditure burden to municipal governments".[42] As a result, municipalities remain financially, structurally, and politically restrained in their ability to encourage citizen engagement and promote local democracy.

Conclusions

This paper began by outlining the problem of the democratic deficit in Canada. By analyzing and combining Phillips and Graham and Zurn's descriptions of the deficit, a comprehensive understanding of the problem in the Canadian context was derived. Canadian democratic deficits exist not only at a social level (between citizens' expectations of government and actual governing practices) but also on an institutional level (between the responsibilities of governments and their actual fiscal and authoritative abilities). Applied to the local sphere, this deficit implies the need for genuine citizen engagement through municipal institutional reform.

This institutional deficit was corroborated by an examination of both provincial and federal initiatives to engage local citizens in politics at the local level. The 1992 CORE initiative and the 1999 SCPI were examined in accordance with Phillips and Graham's criteria for successful engagement. In

addition, Pal's definition of genuine citizen engagement as an opportunity for broad value-based discussions was added to these criteria. However, based on the failures of these initiatives and the insights offered by Sancton and Magnusson on the limitations of municipal powers, it seems there is at least one more requirement for ensuring successful citizen engagement at the local level: local institutional reforms to encourage citizen engagement must be accompanied by the appropriate legislative and financial power to implement the results.

Notes

[1] Katherine A. Graham and Susan D. Phillips, "Citizen engagement: beyond the customer revolution," C*anadian Public Administration* Vol. 40, No. 2 (1997), 255.

[2] Phillips and Graham, "Citizen engagement," 263.

[3] Phillips and Graham, "Citizen engagement," 264.

[4] Phillips and Graham, "Citizen engagement," 260.

[5] Henry Milner, "The Problem of Political Drop-Outs: Canada in Comparative Perspective," in *Canadian Parties in Transition* 3rd ed., eds. Alain-G. Gagnon and A. Brian Tanguay (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2007), 438, 443.

[6] Michael Zurn, "Democratic Governance beyond the Nation-State," in *Democracy Beyond The State? The European Dilemma and the Emerging Global Order*, eds. Michael Th. Greven and Louis W. Pauly (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 93.

[7] Phillips and Graham, "Citizen engagement," 259.

[8] See Magnusson, Halseth & Booth, Sancton

[9] Leslie A. Pal, *Beyond Policy Analysis: Public Issue Management in Turbulent Times,* 3rd ed. (Toronto: Nelson, Thomson Canada Limited, 2006), 265.

[10] Pal, *Beyond Policy Analysis,* 265.

[11] Susan D. Phillips, "From Charity to Clarity: Reinventing Federal Government-Voluntary Sector Relationships," *The Philanthropist* Vol 16, No.4 (2001), 258.

[12] Pal, *Beyond Policy Analysis,* 267.

[13] Milner, "The Problem of Political Drop-Outs," 456.

[14] Phillips and Graham, "Citizen engagement," 267-269.

[15] Phillips and Graham, "Citizen engagement," 260; Pal, *Beyond Policy Analysis,* 266; Andrew Sancton, "The Municipal Role in the Governance of

Canadian Cities," in *Canadian Cities in Transition: The Twenty-First Century,* eds. Trudi Bunting and Pierre Filion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 427.

[16] Greg Halseth and Annie Booth, "'What Works Well; What Needs Improvement': lessons in public consultation from British Columbia's resource planning processes," *Local Environment* Vol. 8, No. 4 (2003), 441.

[17] Halseth and Booth, "'What Works Well: What Needs Improvement,'" 448.

[18] Halseth and Booth, "'What Works Well: What Needs Improvement,'" 453.

[19] Halseth and Booth, "'What Works Well: What Needs Improvement,'" 453.

[20] Halseth and Booth, "'What Works Well: What Needs Improvement,'" 453.

[21] Halseth and Booth, "'What Works Well: What Needs Improvement,'" 441.

[22] Christopher Leo, "Deep Federalism: Respecting Community Difference in National Policy," *Canadian Journal of Political Science,* Vol.39, No.3 (2006), 490.

[23] Leo, "Deep Federalism," 494.

[24] Leo, "Deep Federalism," 494.

[25] Leo, "Deep Federalism," 497.

[26] Leo, "Deep Federalism," 496.

[27] Leo, "Deep Federalism," 501.

[28] Leo, "Deep Federalism," 501.

[29] Leo, "Deep Federalism," 501-502.

[30] Leo, "Deep Federalism," 502.

[31] Warren Magnusson, "Protecting the Right of Local Self-Government," *Canadian Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 38, No. 4 (2005), 921.

[32] Magnusson, "Protecting the Right of Local Self-Government," 919.

[33] Sancton, "The Municipal Role in the Governance of Canadian Cities," 435.

[34] Sancton, "The Municipal Role in the Governance of Canadian Cities," 435.

[35] Warren Magnusson, "Introduction: The development of Canadian urban government," in *City politics in Canada*, eds. Warren Magnusson and Andrew Sancton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983): 29.

[36] Magnusson, "Protecting the Right of Local Self-Government," 919.

[37] Sancton, "The Municipal Role in the Governance of Canadian Cities," 440.

[38] Magnusson, "Introduction," 29.

[39] Magnusson, "Introduction," 29.

[40] Sancton, "The Municipal Role in the Governance of Canadian Cities," 428.

[41] C. Richard Tindal and Susan Nobes Tindal, *Local Government in Canada*, 6th ed. (Scarborough, ON: Nelson, Thomson Canada Limited, 2004), 373.

[42] Tindal and Tindal, *Local Government in Canada,* 344.