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Dispositional Immobility: An Analysis of Non-Decisions as Public Policy in Alberta's City-Regions

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Abstract: For local governments in city-regions, the term “dispositional immobility” can be applied in situations where the question of municipal restructuring becomes an arena for permanent public policy non-decisions. Disposition is here used to mean both the inherent qualities of persons and communities, and the arrangement of the structures within an area. It is argued that administrative stasis results as dispositional immobility creates tactical political barriers to innovation, and policy inaction becomes a deliberate response. In Alberta, city-regions since the 1950s have preserved multiple autonomous municipalities rather than initiating centripetal reforms as is the case elsewhere in Canada. An analysis of the province and its leadership during the past half-century suggests reasons for this entrenched dispositional immobility within the institutional culture of Alberta's city-regions. Our conclusion suggests that the time has come to rethink and challenge the long-standing and unquestioned continuation of the city-regional structural status quo.

Keywords: city-region governance; policy non-decision; dispositional immobility; Canadian city government; policy inertia; policy innovation

1. Introduction

Of Canada's ten largest census metropolitan areas, seven now possess a form of unitary municipal administration that is largely coincident with the urbanized area, and two have an area-wide second tier of authority. Only one, the capital region of Edmonton, Alberta, has neither, and instead maintains a pattern of multiple autonomous municipalities which has persisted since the early 1950s.

When policy makers choose not to disturb what is already in place—that is, when they make a decision *not* to decide on a potential course of action—what is important to notice but usually overlooked is that, once taken, a decision not to decide is very clearly a policy choice made. This is what Leslie Pal has labelled a *static response*: “a deliberate choice not to intervene made after an analysis of the problem” ([1], p. 156). Pal identifies four different explanations as to why a static response to an issue may occur [1], paraphrased as follows:

- (1) The perception that there is no problem within the state's jurisdiction requiring resolution;
- (2) Given various constraints, there are insufficient resources available to address the issue;
- (3) Caution dictates that a precedent should not be set by taking action; and
- (4) Experience shows that, given time, the policy shortcoming regarding the issue in question will most likely correct itself.

However, Pal's four explanations for deliberate inaction are not exhaustive, for one merely has to look at the past sixty years in the province of Alberta to find that successive governments have permitted *non-decisions* to stand as their best policy choice for the governing of the province's two major city-regions, Calgary and Edmonton (the fourth and fifth largest metropolitan agglomerations in Canada, respectively). In fact, when it comes to the question of municipal re-structuring initiatives since the Second World War, Alberta has been the most reluctant to intervene, compared to almost all other Canadian provincial ministries. This situation endures, despite significant demographic and economic change to both the province and its metropolitan areas.

The authors will argue that a new, plausible basis for non-decision making—a *dispositional immobility*—should be recognized as a *fifth* explanation for “static responses” to public policy issues. This essay presents a case study to understand the entrenched administrative stasis in Alberta's city-regions, explaining why and how successive policy-makers have maintained such established institutional patterns at the expense of any and all structural change. The evidence, derived from an historical analysis of the province and its leadership, reveals a consciously applied political strategy of *calculated inertia*—which is a decision not to decide—that has served to defend and perpetuate the status quo among city-regional municipal institutions.

1.1. Dispositional Immobility

For the city-regions presented in this case study, the authors argue that the *non-decision* is primarily the logical consequence of dispositional immobility. This is reflected in the reality that there has been little appetite for institutional change apparent and that the *status quo* has proven comfortable for at least a plurality of residents for some time. It must also be observed that there has been no crisis in the delivery of public services and a superficially homogenous set of socio-economic variables across the two regions and the 30 or so municipalities within the study area. There also appears to be general agreement about the public ideology (as gauged by having the same party form the provincial government from 1971–2015). This does not mean that different governing options for the two metropolitan areas are necessarily off the table, however. The suffused latent issue has long been whether adequate government has been a surrogate for a more equitable, economical, imaginative, better planned and more accountable form.

To introduce succinctly the concept of dispositional immobility within a wider context, and to suggest the particular contribution that the idea makes to policy-making models, it is essential to consider the matter of ideology. For instance, Nigel Harris, in his critique of the long period of Conservative party dominance in the United Kingdom, essentially noticed how well that party had tapped into the country's beliefs: “Conservative ideology is British public ideology, its precise nature depending upon which groups are dominant in British society at any given time and what is the nature of the radical attack upon the British status quo” ([2], p. 99). He concluded by observing that if the radical attack were so marginal as not to offer any serious threat, “then Conservative ideology becomes ‘common sense’” ([2], p. 99). The idea of a public ideology is important because that belief system sets appropriate parameters for the public debate and resolution of issues, the sort of space John Kingdon or David Easton would label a “political window” [3]. The important contribution of the concept of *dispositional immobility* is that this idea represents the practical policy aspect of the public ideology and takes into account far deeper roots in the community consciousness than Pal's four explanations for policy makers' embrace of the *static response*. At the same time, the idea of a public ideology is itself subtler and more nuanced than what Kingdon would have referred to as “the national mood” ([3], p. 146).

Especially where local governments are viewed simply as ensconced in “caretaker functions,” politicians can come quickly to accept as truth an axiom often attributed to Machiavelli that “there is no constituency for change,” and calculated inertia as public policy becomes a legitimate holding pattern. Where a public ideology is very widely shared, that set of beliefs can spill over to imbue currently existing local government arrangements with “common sense” status, and the existing

disposition of local government structures will be viewed as generally agreeable. In short, if citizens as individuals are not disposed to think of themselves as having any ideological or substantive stake sufficient to change individual or community circumstances positively, the default will be current common sense arrangements.

When it is widely believed that there is not enough evidence and/or support to justify change, policy-makers will simply decide not to decide. What should be better recognized is that the independent variable leading to this calculated inertia is *dispositional immobility*. The added value of the concept of dispositional immobility thus lies in its recognition of just how deeply embedded in the community-consciousness policy-makers' static responses may genuinely be.

Quite frequently, calculated inertia can be identified when any of the following situations occur with regards to a potential decision: (1) the decision is simply deferred; (2) it is put off by referring it to some committee "for further hearings and study"; (3) it is handed over to the public bureaucracy "for review and recommendation"; or, (4) it is given to task forces or commissions of inquiry "for full public investigation." These four common examples of non-decisions should not be confused with situations in which comprehensive policy decisions have been delegated to some agency to actively administer in detail, for that would indicate that a decision to decide had actually been made.

Another scenario in which dispositional immobility comes into play occurs when the decision not to decide is not even made, which constitutes an invisible choice that precludes any possible outcome other than the *status quo*. Theoretical refinement of this notion arose in the original community power debates between political science and sociology—a non-contest about the relative influence of either pluralist systems or power elites which was resolved through disengagement. The idea of potential choices simply not considered, and power struggles not entered into publicly, became best known through the work of Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz and their dissection of "the second face of power" [4]. They pointed out that certain issues or potential allocative choices are not thought to be within the domain of the political system; hence latent possibilities for policy action are not brought forward and public acceptance is assumed to have been given through inattention. In specific policy areas such as questions about city-region structural change, this reflects dispositional immobility, and innovative ideas simply do not arise.

While the ideas in this essay are certainly related to agenda setting by public officials and is thus descended from the work of John Kingdon beginning in the 1980s, he himself notes the important (and obvious) caveat at the outset: "Out of all conceivable subjects or problems to which officials could be paying attention, they do in fact seriously attend to some rather than others" ([3], p. 3). Thus, only serious subjects warrant agenda-setting, and Kingdon devotes considerable attention to the various streams which might introduce new thinking into "policy windows." The concern of this essay, however, is the gap between the array of "conceivable subjects" and Kingdon's "policy windows" in which agenda are set and decisions made. The pertinent questions herein are: What prevents people from coming to think of a long-standing condition as a problem? In addition, what conceivable circumstances might permit institutions to congeal, to become routinized in the public mind barring the extraordinary occurrence of exceptional events or a crisis in the delivery of a vital public service? As Kingdon himself points out, "[it] is a major conceptual and political accomplishment..." to bring people and communities to view old problems in a new, more urgent light ([3], p. 115).

The failure to devise a major political accomplishment is particularly relevant in some Canadian city-regions with multiple local governments where the provision of local social services has been primarily a discretionary matter. Even if service costs were to be funded largely through intergovernmental transfers, many quasi-rural and upper middle-class suburbs will not initiate them because of the perception that such policies would stand in conflict with "their own community values." Wherever such municipalities can bar entry into their communities by those in need of such programs through the legal expedient of restrictive zoning practices, no demand for their provision is ever heard. This situation would be familiar to Bachrach and Baratz, who noted:

“When the dominant values, the accepted rules of the game, the existing power relations among groups, and the instruments of force, singly or in combination, effectively prevent certain grievances from developing into full-fledged issues which call for decisions, it can be said that a non-decision-making situation exists” ([5], p. 641).

Moreover, under such circumstances, even when workers in the wider city-regional professional community are aware of policy deficiencies, they are unlikely to raise the matter in the public arena because they know in advance that their ideas would be, at best, in the minority and that their actions might be considered disloyal by their employers with potential career consequences. Power is thus exercised through the creation of subconscious barriers to the airing of policy options, again resulting in dispositional immobility when it comes to contemplating dramatic policy challenges.

1.2. Non-Decisions as Public Policy

As to where restructuring decisions are to be made, in the Canadian political system the authority to create, restructure or abolish municipal governments is vested exclusively in provincial legislatures by the Canadian constitution (s. 92.8). Additionally, because Canada is a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, this means that the ministry decides either by specific statute or by regulation under delegated authority. No Canadian province has ever ceded an iota of this ultimate authority; there is no breath of an American-style of city home-rule. Moreover, no province has ever permitted an area-wide referendum on a question of municipal re-structuring.

Ministers inclined to the non-decision intuitively recognize that it is normally futile to try to reorganize local government institutions in a polycentric city-region. This may be attributable to calculated inertia and concerns about making potentially unpopular decisions that will affect citizens who are perceived to be ill-disposed towards the initiative in question. This in turn suggests that we really are considering matters of disposition, which may mean both the inherent qualities of people (person or community) as well as the arrangement of items in a room or house (or the number and size of local governments within a region). In this duality, then, the suburbs of a relatively well established core city can be seen as existing in a dispositional stasis in that people therein perceive themselves as set apart from those they have left behind—the well-known psychology of suburban living. The comforting psychological distance from the perceived problems and concomitant anxieties of the core city acquired through living in a detached suburb has been observed from as far back as James Bryce in 1888. In turn, the local governments themselves accept that the disposition of existing structural arrangements for themselves and the other relatively autonomous peripheral agencies is by and large agreeable. Since the dual dispositions are harmonious the institutional situation is also immobile, there is never any compelling need to adjust boundaries or, for that matter, functional arrangements in service delivery. Such marginal economic and sociological distinctions as exist among people and their many suburban governments pale against the much larger contrast with a purported demonstrable distance all claim to share from core city conditions. In short, the disposition of individuals (individual psychology) reinforces the placement disposition of municipalities (as institutions).

Simply put, prevailing dispositions thus mean that standing policy respecting institutional provisions (i.e., boundaries and/or core functions) is not easily changed. For policy adaptation the plain reality is that, barring melodramatic systemic failure (usually in the arena of hard service delivery), policy stasis does not have to be justified at anywhere near the same evidentiary levels of rigour that any style of innovative challenge must accumulate.

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, comparative study of fragmented local government regimes in world city-regions has identified a metropolitan problem commonly associated with the failure to develop a problem-solving institution roughly congruent with observed policy problems in the urbanized territory. It has been regularly observed that shortcomings have invariably arisen in: the provision of basic public service; effective deployment of the community's fiscal resources; and, the development of any sort of metropolitan agenda. This experience reveals that these general

problems may be grouped into three public policy arenas, any one of which might provide the cathartic spark for a reorganization initiative: (1) the coordination of specific public policies between and among the multiple municipalities; (2) addressing questions of equity in the ability to generate revenues to pay for local services and to ensure rough equality in the levels provided all citizens of the city-region; (3) the matter of establishing clear lines of accountability to the public regarding decisions either made or not taken.

Over the past 60 years, issues from all three of these arenas have persistently arisen in Alberta, resulting in both major metropolitan regions in the province being forced to seek some form of “satisficing” governance as a substitute for an *in absentia* government. In the Calgary city-region the common set of policy problems has been mitigated considerably by an aggressive core city expansion campaign through both amalgamation and annexation during the 1960s and 1970s which led to 92 per cent of the regional population residing within core city boundaries. In the Edmonton metropolitan area such a strategy has not been as successful, and the authors of this essay argue that the most plausible explanation for three generations of second best institutions in the capital region is due to political leadership responding to an entrenched institutional culture displaying dispositional immobility.

Further reinforcing dispositional immobility is another phenomenon. This is that a number of city and town councils in some 21st century Old Commonwealth city-regions are so persuaded of the legitimacy of their claims to a semi-sovereign existence that they seem almost to be channeling a corporatist form of political organization [6]. In Canada, this thinking would be akin to the belief strand governing central-local relations prevalent in the public ideology of Quebec for a long period culminating around the years 1942–1962. For today’s provincial politicians, this actually constitutes a position in conflict with the dominant liberal-pluralist values in which a large number of other groups—whose memberships are voluntary and self-sorting—are in competition for the allocation of always scarce resources. In the corporatist world-view, only a limited number of interests are granted formal recognition, membership is compulsory, and the units are assigned in law a specific list of powers and a representational monopoly [7]. Despite periodic wider area elections in such a regime, legitimate public policy interaction still tends to be hierarchal and hegemonic within a world of high level functional expertise and controlled expression of clientelist “demands.” This is the world that the polycentric metropolis formally recognises—and, indeed, exists to emphasize—with its institutional differentiation among citizen-consumers via the artifact of municipal boundaries.

Such entrenchment of what is virtually a zero sum game means that there can be very little structural incrementalism since there will be, by definition, no legitimate alternative disposition (i.e., end game) on the table. It would be along the lines of the argument proposed by Charles Lindblom [8] that such fuzzy “decision-making” enables the *status quo* to become the default setting because “the benefits and costs of the present arrangements are known to the policy actors” ([7], p. 171). Therefore, the status quo is the best that can be expected without an improbable disruption of *dispositional immobility* that exists among the political interests presently in play within the system.

2. Methods

The methods used by the authors in this case study have included an examination of the historical evolution of city-regions in a subnational context informed by comparative experience within Canada and North America. In addition, much of the knowledge-base for this current investigation arises from a culmination of 45 years of scholarly activity and applied participant-observer experience conducted by the first author, including:

- (1) The collection and scrutiny of relevant documents, including (but not exclusively restricted to) government statements and press releases, commissioned studies and Commission reports, legislative acts and orders-in-council, briefing notes, legal opinions (as available and appropriate) and other studies by interested parties within the relevant policy community.
- (2) Numerous unstructured personal interviews with individuals in positions of authority.

- (3) A directed content analysis of print media coverage of city-regional issues in Alberta from 1974 to 2014.

This study has also involved longitudinal data collection and analysis of city-regional revenues and expenditures, some of which has been elsewhere reported. Those findings, although they contribute to some of the assessments made in this study, are not in themselves central to the main argument.

These complementary methodological elements have provided a unique and valuable perspective upon the issue of municipal structuring in Alberta that has led to the formation of the hypothesis and supporting arguments put forth in this essay.

3. Origins

3.1. *The Historical Pattern of Municipal Development in Alberta*

Alberta's population has urbanized since the Second World War: current population reports reveal that 85 per cent of its 4,216,900 residents live in urban areas, and two-thirds of all Albertans choose now to live in the Calgary and Edmonton metropolitan areas. Despite this, the municipal governing of these large, complex city-regions has proven an irresolvable conundrum to successive Alberta ministries blinkered by a provincial electoral system significantly imbalanced to rural advantage. Beginning with the election of a Progressive Conservative government in 1971 under Peter Lougheed, it might be said that, "If there is an Alberta approach to dealing with regional problems in recent times it most certainly involves creating the mechanisms and processes that permit voluntary collective municipal action within a geographic region" ([9], p. 73). However, seldom have so many words described such minimal policy action. Since Lougheed's second term, the Alberta model has emphasized continental drift at the expense of anything seismically noticeable.

Since 1971, at the national level, Canada has experienced 12 federal governments with eight different Prime Ministers from two major political parties. During the same period, Alberta did not experience a single change in government, keeping the Conservatives in power for 44 years. With respect to governing city-regions, the Alberta game plan throughout this time closely emulated the distinctive leadership style of William Lyon Mackenzie-King, the longest-serving Prime Minister in the Commonwealth. Of Mackenzie-King's approach, celebrated Canadian social democrat, academic (McGill Dean of Law), poet (the Montreal Group) and public intellectual, Frank R. Scott, once observed in satire:

Truly he will be remembered
Wherever men honour ingenuity,
Ambiguity, inactivity, and political longevity.
Let us raise up a temple
To the cult of mediocrity,
Do nothing by halves
Which can be done by quarters ([10], p. 38).

Such poetry sums up provincial urban policy in Alberta quite nicely. The primary consequence of the paucity of provincial intervention in the governing of its two major city-regions was a ring of suburbs concertinaed around the outskirts of these two cities by the end of the 20th century.

In 1954, the Alberta provincial government's response to dramatic urban growth pressures was to appoint the (McNally) Royal Commission on the Metropolitan Development of Calgary and Edmonton. This body specifically examined and then rejected the alternatives of two-tier federation such as in Toronto, or government by special purpose districts as existed in Vancouver. Instead, in 1956, the commission unreservedly recommended the amalgamation of Alberta's two metro centres as the best course of action ([11], sec. XII, 2–3). However, the provincial government of the day chose to ignore these findings in favour of ameliorating the core cities' debt loads, and the recommended

amalgamation failed to materialise. Any need for updated thought in this policy realm has ever since eluded all post-1956 ministries.

By and large, city-regions in Alberta were abandoned to their own devices when it came to any matter related to regional planning and development. Thus, the golden period of Canadian city-regional municipal reform, which started in the 1950s bypassed Alberta. Provincial policy stasis somehow immunized it against the perceived perniciousness of municipal reforms occurring elsewhere in the country, including Metro Toronto (1954), regional districts in BC (1956), regional government in Ontario in the late 1960s, Winnipeg Unicity (1971), and then Toronto 'Megacity' a generation later (1997). Throughout this resistance to municipal change, there was always the promise of a better "made in Alberta" idea. However, such an idea has yet to emerge.

Prior to the new provincial government in 1971, Calgary city's non-elected commission board had guided a policy of consistently aggressive expansion by amalgamation (including the absorption of three small towns immediately after the release of the McNally report) and then annexation. Edmonton's elected council became victim of political intrigue over a suburban development (Sherwood Park) and British decentralist town planning, the consequence being that commuter towns expanded madly. In contrast to Edmonton, Calgary city since 1956 has tried to control urban expansion by specifically rejecting regional servicing agreements of any sort, opting not to provide service to districts along but outside its borders. On the other hand, Edmonton's power, water, and sewerage utilities behaved much like private corporations with the goal of producing profits from sales to dispersed developments anywhere. Obvious consequences followed, with administratively autonomous suburbs reaping the benefits of the City of Edmonton's services and resources without having to face the costs of development, production and maintenance of those services.

During the period 1979–1982, Edmonton city council finally moved aggressively to try to consolidate the three major local governments in the Capital City region—St. Albert, the County of Strathcona, and the City of Edmonton—having been directed by the Premier to present its case for consolidation to the regulatory agency, the Local Authorities Board (LAB). However, an unfortunate convergence of timelines in political history occurred as Edmonton's challenge collided with the federal-provincial constitutional patriation imbroglio of the same years (1980–1982). Although Edmonton won its case for consolidation before the Board, the Lougheed government chose to modify the decision made by the LAB to consolidate the three major urban governments in the Capital Region to permit the continuation of two major autonomous suburbs (St. Albert, and the County of Strathcona). The authority to amend LAB orders was the result of an amendment to section 20.2 of the Municipal Government Act passed by the Alberta government in 1981 after the City of Edmonton had successfully argued its amalgamation case [12]. The cabinet decision against the consolidation of the Capital Region thus enshrined a doctrine of dispositional immobility within Alberta's municipal policy arena for the next 30 years.

The irony is that over the past half century, Peter Lougheed was actually the only premier to take city-regionalism issues seriously. Still, he ultimately chose to affirm the dispositional immobility of the existing polycentric model, thus preventing any form of municipal reorganization from occurring. This Alberta approach could be labelled: "The Peter Lougheed three-step to structural stasis."

3.1.1. The First Step

The first step came early on as the provincial government, taking a strict constitutionalist view of the federal system, moved to assert exclusive provincial paramountcy with respect to municipalities as per the *Constitution Act [Canada] 1982*, section 92.8. This position was solidified in 1975 after both Calgary and Edmonton had applied for funding support for general plan reviews from the federal Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. When it became clear that their requests for federal funds were likely to be approved, the Lougheed government quickly informed representatives of both cities and the federal minister that, due to provincial constitutional concerns, it would not permit Alberta cities to accept federal funding for their projects.

3.1.2. The Second Step

Step two was a particular, unintended consequence which developed as provincial political concern for its own “sovereignty” during the constitutional imbroglio of 1981–1982 reached virtually paranoid levels. Some principals in the municipal ministry mistakenly concluded that relative constitutional autonomy also applied to local governments. Consequently, successor cabinets were duped into inaction by continuing to mistakenly apply this false analogy to all provincial-local relations whenever problems presented. Somewhat like Social Credit governments in the mid-1950s, they applied petroleum money to buy peace with cash in any structural policy dust-ups. For example, speaking of the Lougheed term, Edward LeSage and Melville McMillan note that, “Where largesse was possible, the province exercised it. Periodic efforts were made to lighten the financial burden of municipalities...[but] little in the way of structural change was introduced to the system” [13]. This incidentally reveals that the downside of dependence on a resource extraction economy is that, when one is able, “*laissez les bon temps rouler*” cash is easily dispensed to clientele. However, the reverse has also proven irrevocably true.

After Premier Lougheed retired in 1985, residual competence in the cabinet ministry quickly diminished. With a few exceptions, the ministry had to be chosen from among elected representatives with little or no political experience, and from such divergent employment backgrounds as lawyers, political aides, mid-level private-sector managers, school administrators, sales associates, and the like. There was little common ideology: these became ministries which would say and do absolutely anything to retain the fruits of power. Since little was being contemplated by anybody in the provincial government that would effect change in municipal public policy, dispositional immobility continued to prevail. The most blatant case of calculated inertia was the Edmonton Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) where the Metropolitan Regional Planning Commission had been one of ten terminated as collateral damage during the Klein era attack on budget deficits. After the 1997 election, a new Minister, the Hon. Iris Evans, who had been the former Reeve of Strathcona County (a jurisdiction stridently opposed to any annexation of land by Edmonton since 1947), garnered publicity by appointing a “Regional Governance Review” in 1998, the Commissioner of which was former Provincial Treasurer Lou Hyndman. Hyndman had been a member of the cabinet Priorities and Planning Committee which brought about a weak and ultimately ineffectual LAB amalgamation decision in 1982, in which the terms of reference specifically stipulated that no boundaries were to be altered and no functional responsibilities reassigned. The final review would only recommend greater inter-municipal “cooperation” [14]. Seldom has the potential for innovation been more effectively pre-squelched or inertia better enshrined. In short, all is now as it was in 1956 except for a Capital Region Board created in 2008 whose representational complexity (of 24 municipalities), absence of functional responsibility, and lack of any other authority including the capacity to generate revenue, has absolutely thwarted any capacity to govern.

3.1.3. The Third Step

The third and final step to structural stasis that can be attributed to the Lougheed era followed when the mistaken understanding within the ministry that relative constitutional autonomy also applied to local governments evolved into standing policy. This quickly became legitimated by several false premises that will be elaborated in Section 4.3. The point is that these fabrications permanently aborted the use of the twin tools of annexation and amalgamation that had been the main instruments of Alberta’s urban expansion from 1947 to 1980, as well as preventing any search for genuine structural alternatives in city-regional governing and solidifying the dispositional immobility of Alberta’s city-regions.

3.2. New Regionalism

About a generation ago, *new regionalism* ideas became a sort of legitimation in America for selective “new” alternatives in city-regional “governance opportunities” intended to overcome the well observed and frustrating shortcomings of its long-existing, entrenched polycentric government systems [15]. The essential case of new regionalism has always been to present solutions that are second best to area-wide city governing in the absence of the political will to innovate through centripetalism. It is a search for lowest common denominator “new mechanisms” unlikely to rattle the silverware on the solid oak dinner table of dispositional immobility. For other countries, the central problem is that such thinking is ideologically sourced in American neo-liberal traditions and “public choice” propositions; it is truly the unique product of American exceptionalism. However, because that public ideology is so dominant, these ideological foundations are accepted as “common sense.” One consequence, almost unimaginable, is that recent local government textbooks in Canada do not have a single “ideology” entry in their indexes. Leaving such a fundamental question unasked would be thought quite unusual in any other sub-field of Political Science.

One thing that the discipline should have learned about policy debates by now is that diverting them towards a purported non-ideological resolution, to be considered as being *only* matters for “technical and financial” administration, quickly becomes, to paraphrase the prescient E.E. Schattschneider [16], a value-neutral way of imposing one’s own values.

A sampling of recent scholarship by Canadian authors studying municipal systems reveals that consistently channeling “new regionalism” conceptualization has established a “normal” set of underlying assumptions. This in turn has meant a high measure of obliviousness to the actual impact of the resulting structural and dispositional immobility enshrined. Applying new regionalism ideas—as they have been defined by American scholarship—to Canadian local government should by no means be acceptable as a universally applicable resolution to all problems. While this way of thinking may be helpful in understanding exceptional Canadian circumstances, more likely it will not. This is because the Canadian public ideology is fundamentally different, and not simply a pale shadow of the American version.

Despite this reality, the reportage by Richard Tindal and Susan Tindal notes that Alberta’s Capital Region initiatives are a top-of-the-list “fit within the new regionalism” [17]. They never question the stateside broadside, and instead maintain: “It is instructive to examine briefly the solutions that have been advocated by observers of the American scene” ([17], p. 156). However, why would anyone think that? The Tindals answer this question in their observation that, “most of the...[writers] about this issue have largely ignored the issue of boundaries and have encouraged various mechanisms that would enable municipalities... to cooperate with each other” ([17], p. 156). Of course the writers they consult would do this, simply because the fact of home rule—which is American *sui generis*—renders amalgamations literally unthinkable. This automatic acceptance of new regionalism provides a good example to support how deeply embedded dispositional immobility seems to be within the system. Tindal and Tindal then devote considerable discussion to disapproving any case for 21st century structural consolidation, finally defining the absolute answer by the (wrong) question they chose to ask. That question was: Is saving money the primary objective of amalgamation? It is not.

In a similar vein, Joseph Garcea and Edward LeSage, in concluding their anthology about provincial municipal systems, predict absolutely no possible new course for Canada’s municipal canoe: “The reform die has been cast and there is little to suggest that this can be changed substantially” ([18], p. 334). The only exception that they can foresee for city-regions lies in the “governance” of these regions “occurring within a deliberately crafted and vital multi-level [set of] arrangements” ([18], p. 334). In other words, this would be the past paid forward. Their various authors ultimately demonstrate how new regionalism ideas lead to dispositional immobility, for they find among the provincial systems that: (a) in Newfoundland and Labrador, “municipalities generally were opposed to the concept of regionalization...as a serious threat to the autonomy of individual towns...[and] providing the provincial government with an opportunity to download services” ([19], p. 202); (b) in Ontario,

“There was little support for restructuring in any area...Constituent municipalities were upset about losing their local identities, particularly if the merger involved rival municipalities” ([20], p. 133); and, in Alberta, acknowledging the provincial intervention with the Capital Region Board, the dubiously positive assessment is made that purposefully adopting “a consensus decision-making approach” will encourage “22 municipalities to effect collaborative action” ([9], pp. 73–74), although there are no solid reasons provided to support the supposition that so many parties with their own interests would be able to agree upon anything.

In the third, most recent volume devoted to Canadian provincial municipal systems, *Foundations of Governance* [21], all is presented very much as expected. There is little or no deviation from the previous examples, again highlighting how entrenched in dispositional immobility the application of American new regionalism really is. In Newfoundland and Labrador, Feehan et al., report that regional governing has failed to evolve, for: “opposition to such bodies is rooted in fear of a loss of community autonomy;” such regional boards as do exist “are not regional governments per se and have no revenue-raising authority;” and, at best, inter-municipal cooperation can be accomplished only on such things as waste collection ([22], p. 462). Smith and Stewart note that in British Columbia, although there has recently been enhanced provincial recognition “of the authority and autonomy of the municipal level of government,” they add the caveat that “provincial precedence is ultimately maintained” ([23], p. 289). Overall, significant structural adaptation in the municipal system has essentially been a non-starter in BC since 1956.

As for Alberta, LeSage and McMillan express great expectations for the provincially-legislated Capital Region Board for Edmonton, maintaining that, “Regional cooperation is [the] more widely accepted approach to addressing regional issues and from [our] research...it is clear that municipalities are prepared to cooperate when the advantages are obvious to them” ([13], p. 440). However, what is actually “clear” from the evidence is that, after seven years of operations, the Capital Regional Board is better at engaging in inter-municipal policy conversations than they are at enacting an authoritative regional plan with any teeth. In short, it has been very good at preserving the dispositional immobility that has been Alberta’s capital region *modus operandi* for over half a century.

Finally, in the conclusion to this third textbook, co-editor Robert Young implicitly concurs with the evidence of ineffective—or simply non-existent—provincial policy-making within the municipal arena, by noting that Canadian provincial direct supervision of bigger municipalities began to wane beginning in Alberta in 1994 [21]. There is an implicit irony to be found in the juxtaposition of two later and not incorrect comments made by Young:

“A major shift in most provincial-municipal systems is the allocation of greater power to the major cities” ([21], p. 491).

“[T]here [remain] some fundamental issues [...] One is the disparities between the tax bases of different municipalities, and the basic fact that similar rates of taxation can produce greater revenues (and better services) in relatively rich areas” ([21], p. 493).

The irony, which is one of importance, lies in the fact that the examples he cites for his first statement are Vancouver, Winnipeg, Montreal, and Toronto—all but the first of which exist in city-regions governed by unitary institutions. This therefore demonstrates Young’s implicit acknowledgement that the cities that have flourished best as a result of their greater power are those that have, in fact, shunned the ideas of new regionalism. The problems he identifies in his second comment essentially define the enduring “metropolitan problem” of equity within polycentric systems, bolstered by new regionalism ideas, and for which examples of both are presented throughout the textbook.

The loose-fitting quilt of co-operative service agreements and functional districts as nominally exists in Canadian city-regions has accomplished little but to patch over and maintain the institutionalized social and economic dispositional immobility which archaic municipal boundaries codify. The well-known policy consequences of this pattern, persistent and consistent overall, are

discussed elsewhere [6,24,25]. In short, in polycentric city-regions, questions about policy and program equity or about wider provision of redistributive policies municipally, cannot be answered if they are not asked. In addition, they cannot be asked when calculated inertia continuously produces scenarios in which non-decisions define public policy.

4. Discussion

4.1. *Shaken, Not Stirred*

To disrupt the stasis that exists because of institutionalized dispositional immobility requires an abrupt jolt, not an incremental nudge, away from long-standing networks of convenience among local public officials. This disruption usually entails private sector leadership conducive to change and prepared to shake things up. Such community leaders, sometimes labelled an “urban regime,” will have grown accustomed to successful outcomes in a variety of private and public policy pursuits. In Canada, the important step towards more centripetal forms of governing has occurred when such a loose coalition of community leaders becomes frustrated with existing arrangements; collectively, they will have directly observed that the urban myth of multiple distinct, self-sufficient and self-contained local communities requiring multiple municipal operations to be governed well is simply not supported by sufficient evidence of good results.

This dimension of the process is a key step in the well-established “Old Commonwealth” approach to reorganizing the municipal institutions of city-regions [6]. The strategy is grounded by the Westminster parliamentary model for representative democracy, with its authority concentrated within a small, all powerful, executive. This standard consolidations approach consistently appears to be born of *pragmatism* rather than of ideology: it usually comes into existence only after incremental patchworks of bilateral contracting, special purpose districting, or two-tier municipal federation have been judged to have failed as solutions for city-regional governance. However, the fundamental irony is that, to be implemented, such a pragmatic solution appears to require the *ideological* impetus of a new governing party.

The case for consolidation is typically conducted in private, between urban regime leaders and politicians not bound by past decisions, all of whom recognize the need for significant policy renewal in order to break the deadlock of dispositional immobility that has gripped the region. By the evidence, best structural change will come swiftly and decisively, with quick, bold and broad strokes, when political authorities—often against the advice of officials tied to clienteles—are finally persuaded that dramatic action is necessary if the *status quo* is to be shaken, not stirred. The lesson of the metro London struggle in the 1960s is thus instructive as well as universal [26], teaching that the passage of appropriate legislation to bring about consolidation has consistently followed a now-predictable path, described so eloquently in Macbeth’s soliloquy: “If it were done, when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well, it were done quickly” ([27], Act 1, Scene 7, lines 1–2).

To accomplish municipal structural change in this decisive manner, public hearings are restricted, and protests are generally confined to the usual self-interested suspects. Once taken, the decision may seem radical but this is only because it is different. While initial public reaction may seem substantial and very negative, usually it is not, because it is not the voice of the majority of citizens that one hears the loudest. Rather, it is the voice of a complicit media, complete with symbiotic beat journalists, who report from the multiple pulpits in the many city halls in the region, singing a synchronised chorus mourning the loss of polycentric government. However, experience has shown that such songs of dissent are ineffective, for, “Once nudged by urban regimes, provincial governments of right, left and centre have all introduced very similar amalgamations in Canadian city-regions, even when the argument is couched in different terms” ([28], p. 24).

And yet, this change towards amalgamation and consolidation, which is a pattern that emerged consistently across Canada in the late 20th century, as well as across the Old Commonwealth [28], has failed to prevail in Alberta. The reasons for this divergence are explained in the following sections.

4.2. The Alberta Disadvantage

Regarding its local governments, the Alberta provincial government has deployed the populist fraud of “*we’re all in this together; we must all get along*” combined with the nonsensical belief that any policy change must be a “made in Alberta solution,” no matter what structure of privilege would be preserved within its institutions by doing so. As previously discussed, ministers of Municipal Affairs in Alberta have consistently come from the fringes of caucus, with little relevant experience and no plan other than to hold their seats. Without platforms for change and with no real crises in basic service deliveries, the government has never faced much pressure to meddle with city-region institutions. It is no surprise, then, that their performance has perpetuated stasis in “big picture” policy through simply focusing on the routines of support service operations.

In Alberta since 1982, any conceptualization digressing from some sort of “new regionalism” has seldom gone beyond a few token words. To press the issue with any sustained thoughts about “consolidation” is aggressively dismissed by “authorities” as a whimsy tangential to the stubborn reality of the municipal polycentrism tradition. Inter-municipal “co-operation,” a means born out of necessity, is the metric offloaded to legitimize observable dispositional immobility reflected by static boundaries, municipal fiscal austerity and inflexible servicing responsibilities. It is not the freely chosen most advantageous option.

Moreover, enthusiastic devotion to complex rationalizations of simple dispositional immobility has not produced good policy science analysis. For instance, LeSage and McMillan rather flippantly defend two generations of dispositional immobility in the Edmonton region with this remark: “Regional government ranks with the sales tax (and perhaps local political parties) as a political non-starter in Alberta” ([13], p. 440). They present no evidence to sustain this historically inaccurate mythology. Even so, when such illusory beliefs persist only to comfort political gladiators they cumulatively come to create a distinct Alberta disadvantage.

4.3. Striving for Adequacy in the Capital Region

With regards to the Edmonton city-region, the best word to describe the provincial imposition of any sort of agency would be “timid.” In fact, there has been a process of institutionalizing dispositional immobility in the region, which found its footing in the persistent application of three false premises mistakenly derived from the previously discussed “Lougheed three-step” (Sections 3.1.1–3.1.3). This thinking became doctrine by 1990.

The first false premise lay in the certainty that municipalities are somehow sovereign, as though channelling de Tocqueville’s fabulous “indispensable cornerstones of democracy” belief. Such “thinking” was a key assumption of the 1995 Municipal Government Act (MGA) about which the minister at the time jubilantly announced: “The municipalities have become a power unto themselves” ([29], p. 176). However, the reality is that the changes to which the minister was referring actually reduced provincial grants, introduced neither new local functions nor taxation revenues, and continued provincial regulatory guidelines—hardly the hallmarks of municipal sovereignty. In addition, yet, it was a belief in this mythical sovereignty that resulted in the Progressive Conservative caucus being unable to agree on a provincial election finance law for municipalities in 2007 and 2010, because they erroneously believed that it would constitute an “infringement on local autonomy.” Even though never expressed as such, this thinking was very much along the lines of the corporatist world-view discussed previously (Section 1.2), where only a limited, finite number of practitioners can ever be granted formal recognition at any one time.

The second false premise was that all municipalities are seen to be like Alberta’s ubiquitous baseball caps, and that one size will fit all. This means that a generic statute can suffice, that the only rules governing inter-municipal disagreements can be set by provincial quasi-judicial tribunals, and that there need not be any external oversight for even the most egregious planning choices by local councils. A final outcome of this faulty world view was Alberta’s 1995 elimination of ten Regional Planning Commissions, which had made half-hearted attempts to measure, if not control, metropolitan

development. Abolishment of these commissions was an action which was explained as a budget balancing cutback in emulation of a variety of other neo-liberal sub-state North American operations at that time.

The third false premise was the corollary to the preceding. It lay in the absolute certainty, without any need for corroboration, that the multiple municipalities in a metropolitan system are free-standing just like every other one in the province. Consequently, both historic boundaries and the existing multiplicity of town councils in the Capital region are considered sacrosanct. However, this assumption is simply wrong, and, in fact, it is the antithesis of the ministry's assertion of "exclusive provincial paramountcy" over municipalities (as contained in Section 92.8 of the Constitution Act [Canada] 1982) which was the foundation for step one of the "Lougheed three-step" (Section 3.1.1).

In 2008, after a less formally constituted council of government arrangement collapsed following the withdrawal of participation and support by the central city of Edmonton, the provincial government established a Capital Region Board (CRB) by executive order under the aegis of the MGA (Order-in-Council 127/2008, 15 April). The CRB was clearly conceived in reticence as a default from absolute stasis, a third best public policy product that is at best merely adequate in 2016.

The Edmonton region contains a third of Alberta's total population—1,159,869 inhabitants—and includes 24 municipalities ranging from three small villages to five cities of which the largest is Edmonton itself with a population of 812,201 (or 70 per cent of the total). The smallest is "the self-sufficient community" in the Village of Warburg (population 789). The elephant within this regional paddock is the City of Edmonton with its relative size and it has been identified since the 1960s as the threat to the dispositional immobility that the other communities favour. Nowhere has this been more clearly revealed than with the matter of voting in the CRB, as reflected by the fact that far more time and energy was devoted to the voting process than to whatever subject matter was to be voted upon. Ultimately, it was determined that 17 municipalities containing at least 75 per cent of the population would be needed to pass a vote within the CRB (Order-in-Council 127/2008: s. 5.2). To avoid one issue from the past that had confounded the Planning Commission in the 1950s—namely, that for any subject matter passed while a municipality was absent during a vote, the decision would not apply within their boundaries—CRB rules now dictate that if any municipality is not present, or abstains, it will be deemed to have voted in the affirmative (Order-in-Council 127/2008: s. 5.3).

The CRB is financed from the provincial treasury: for 2015, the operating budget of \$3.9M was covered by an Alberta operating grant of \$3M plus carryovers from previous years' grants. There is zero funding from membership contributions. It was created to have but one function beyond conversation and that was to prepare a Regional Growth Plan. It took three years to find and/or "vision" the lowest common denominator for this plan, entitled Growing Forward. Enforcement is dependent upon willing compliance: "Municipalities will be responsible for implementing the Growth Plan by ensuring their statutory planning documents are in alignment" (Order-in-Council 127/2008: s. 19. 1–2).

Still, the Capital Region Board does indeed, as claimed, "provide a venue for the Capital Region municipalities to think strategically and to work together on priorities." In the absence of genuine decision-making opportunities, the virtue of conversation, especially among officials, ought not to be denigrated. After all, in America, the first Council of Government (COG) emerged in 1954 as the Detroit Supervisors Inter-County Committee as a forum for discussion of common problems in area-wide service provision after more audacious governing options had proven to be policy non-starters. Ultimately it was that which spawned the Council of Governments movement.

No mistake should be made about one point however. Without some second-tier agency with a mandate from the province, Canadian local governments in a polycentric city-region are always helpless when any issue on the table relates either to strict controls over regional land-use planning, or to any pooling of their revenue sources and expenditure responsibilities. This is also precisely why municipalities continue to persist in Alberta's two major city-regions as separate but unequal entities:

it is an institutional arrangement based on dispositional immobility that has been legitimated by both successive provincial ministries and regional community leaders.

In the final analysis this is simply because, as E.E. Schattschneider once famously observed, all political institutions represent a mobilization of bias that reflects how power is formally distributed within any given community [16]. Because they are the formal face of power, what municipal structures in any city-region represent is an institutional sculpting of the public ideology, that being the general predisposition of those groups politically dominant at any given time. If provincial legislators choose to work with the default of policy stasis by having multiple local governments serving an otherwise well-integrated city-region, and deploying calculated inertia as an appropriate response to the dispositional immobility of the councillors of small local municipalities, then this public policy of the non-decision will continue to have longer term consequences, negative or not.

Early on, Edmonton's Capital Region Board adopted as its mantra: "Regional action, global opportunity." Seven years later on 17 September 2015, a new nine-mayor task force re-set their purpose with the question, "Is a globally competitive Edmonton Metro Region achievable?" The answer seems unlikely to be positive considering that it is to be decided under the same circumstances in which it has taken seven years of "conversation" to reach an agreement "to explore the possibility of developing 'one seamless fare system'" among the region's transit operations (which is comprised of only one whale and two minnows). In globally competitive terms, Alberta's city-regional institutions—and Edmonton's especially—would not appear to be geared for a race to the top. As long as the region remains shackled with the living ghosts of mid-20th century structures it is unlikely to be able to advance much.

Real change will require a competent, ideologically-grounded, political challenge. This is the lesson of the Old Commonwealth model. To limit discussion of potential innovation to minor incremental changes encapsulated in the pseudo-science of "new regionalism" is but an attempt to masque ideological intentions with technocratic gobbledygook. It would be too facile simply to waffle by saying that either provincial direct intervention is warranted, or that more research is needed: the former is; the latter is not. To do nothing is hardly likely to spur much invention; it simply reinforces the governing policy inadequacies resulting from the dispositional immobility that has encumbered the Edmonton region for the past half century.

5. Conclusions

In the Alberta case, the preservation of dispositional immobility in city-regions has required three principal ingredients, which historical analysis has revealed to be:

- (1) A succession of lacklustre ministers;
- (2) A set of permanent officials prone to perpetuating an uninspired institutional culture (that has grown complacent and ineffectual by promotion from within); and
- (3) A political ministry governing unimpeded with absolutely no agenda for metropolitan governing for at least thirty years.

In what is still a new century, several other variables have begun to reveal structural shortcomings more clearly. First, larger local governments are smarter because they have been building highly professional city bureaucracies well able to negotiate successfully with and, if necessary, frustrate the designs of a junior ministry like municipal affairs. Second, citizens themselves have ready access to much more information and to the same levels of international expertise as any government official; some magical, all-knowing provincial Wizard of Oz is no longer an article of faith. Third, citizens on the web now need few other political resources to organize quickly, easily and effectively. Finally, in a time of widespread fiscal populism, provincial (i.e., sub-national) politics has itself become an idea dust-holder: it is less easily intelligible as parties, policies, and ideological positions no longer provide reliable markers of longer term commitment or direction. All of these factors may work either as barriers to provincial restructuring initiatives or possibly, on the contrary, as genuine free agents and potentially cathartic support for radical adaptation.

If the objective were the interruption of the reign of structural and dispositional immobility as a permanent deterrent to public policy innovation, then what might occur? The practical solution found elsewhere when the Old Commonwealth model was deployed was to change the question asked so that it became the local government equivalent of a Big Question. That could be something like this: “How might the entire city-region, acting as the unified political community it is in reality, best address both allocative and redistributive policies for the region as a whole?” The existing immobility of popular dispositions would no longer be accepted as a natural state or pre-condition, and preserving the free-rider benefits persistently associated with the existence of politically autonomous and privileged suburbs could then be relegated to tangential status.

For the Alberta case, the best solution may have been sitting there all along, or at least, since 1956. At that time, the McNally Commission, after its thoughtful consideration of alternative mechanisms for best structuring of the municipal operation in Alberta’s two city-regions, provided two guiding principles which seem particularly germane to the current situation ([11], sec. xii, 5):

- (1) It is unjust and inequitable that wide variations in the tax base should exist among the local governing bodies that comprise a metropolitan area where that area is in fact one economic and social unit.
- (2) A metropolitan area which is in fact one economic and social unit can ordinarily be more efficiently and effectively governed by one central municipal authority than by a multiplicity of local governing bodies.

A clear policy directive, plainly said. However, when it comes to the structure of Alberta’s city-regions, for 60 years the single factor which has enabled an uninterrupted provincial strategy of the non-decision has been deference to dispositional immobility.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

LAB	Local Authorities Board
CMA	Census Metropolitan Area
MGA	Municipal Government Act
CRB	Capital Region Board
COG	Council of Government

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