

# Conquering the urban nation

## THE SAME OLD SAME OLD

When Rob Ford was elected mayor of Toronto on October 25, 2010, the tables were turned on the Canadian urban political landscape. Until that time, it was inconceivable that a conservative populist would be able to engage the imagination of an urban electorate in this country. In fact, none of the big Canadian cities, regardless of whether there were parties at the local level or not, were governed by a Conservative mayor after Toronto's Mel Lastman resigned in 2003. Ford overcame this spell by beating out former Liberal provincial minister George Smitherman and NDP stalwart Joe Pantalone to win by a landslide.

Raised in a political family (his father was an Ontario Tory cabinet minister), Ford mirrors the profile of many ministers in former Ontario Premier Mike Harris's administration, which was replete with small business persons and dynastic Tories. After the Harris government amalgamated Toronto in 1998 and bled the "megacity" dry through downloading and devolution, it was common wisdom that no Conservative was electable south of Steeles Avenue. In fact, when Stephen Harper won his first minority government, he held no seats in any of Canada's big three cities, a situation that did not improve in his repeat in 2008. His program had little urban content to offer beyond a perfunctory reference to security, often a stand-in for conservative urban programmatic.

The lack of attention to urban issues is perplexing. Canada is, of course, now an urban country. Eighty percent of the country's population lives in urban areas. One in three lives in the three largest cities, Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. In the urbanized stretch along the US-Canadian border, rapid urbanization, strain on social services, environmental stresses, and infrastructure deficits are the daily fare of political decision-makers. The Conservative government seemed aloof to those issues at best and inimical for the most part.

BY SIMON BLACK  
AND ROGER KEIL

Simon Black is a resident PhD student at the City Institute at York University. Roger Keil is director of the City Institute at York University and a professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies.

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## CANADA'S URBAN CRISIS

Yet Conservative antipathy to the urban is not surprising given Harper's Machiavellian focus on maintaining a grip on power. In many respects, the anti-urban bias of the ruling government is bad for the economic performance of the country. Gridlocked highways and underserved urban infrastructure dent the competitiveness of Canadian cities in a global economy where urban agglomerations have become central nodes of capital accumulation. Harper could lubricate the flows of capital and labour with significant state investment, but his dogmatic brand of neoliberalism in which less government equals more freedom eschews a more pragmatic var-

ity of state investment, which sees such investment as key to increased global competitiveness and economic growth.

However, in true Machiavellian style, such concerns are less important in Harper's shrewd electoral calculations than pandering to particular factions of capital, which, like the oil and gas sector, provide political and financial support. The Conservatives were elected with an anti-urban coalition, not a surprise given that "red" urban Tories had been largely marginalized in a post-Reform Conservative Party of Canada with its power base in rural, small-town, and suburban areas, mostly in the West. Harper's electoral strategy was not reliant on winning seats in major cities but did retain support in urban Alberta, where resource-led growth dominates the economy. Since elected, Harper's attention to the urban has been limited to massive support for mega-events such as the G20, though arguably the G20 publicity disaster may have been counterproductive to the Tories' staged performative strategy.

## THIRD-WAY NEOLIBERALISM

Undoubtedly, Harper's principal urban legacy thus far has been undoing the New Deal for Cities and with it, the Paul Martin Liberal's limited progress on urban issues (including a Cities Secretariat in the Privy Council Office). While the full rebate of GST paid by municipalities and a transfer share of the federal gas tax remain, the New Deal established a federal presence in urban Canada. This opened a window of opportunity for cities and provinces to build a pan-Canadian urban strategy around associational governance, an innovation agenda, social and physical infrastructure renewal, and human capital development. However limited in its potential to rebuild social citizenship, based on principles of universality and social justice, this third-way neoliberalism represented a more progressive vision than Harper's anti-urban politics. The New Deal for Cities also opened space for

new claims making by civil society groups organized around urban issues such as homelessness, affordable housing, and poverty reduction.

Under Harper's undoing of most of the New Deal, cities have remained subject to a structural fiscal crisis. The legacies of downloading and devolution have left municipalities cash-strapped and largely reliant on property taxes as a source of fiscal income. As the recent election in Toronto demonstrated, governments that try to break out of the neoliberal straitjacket by introducing new taxes can face tax revolts and a right-wing backlash, which plays into Harper's politics and builds a populist urban base the federal Conservatives could capitalize on come election time.

In this, Harper's anti-urbanism is itself an urban political strategy. The fiscal crises of municipalities provide the political environment in which neoliberal common sense can flourish. Ideas that occupied the fringes of urban political discourse move to the centre as contracting out garbage collection, introducing user fees, privatizing facilities, and expanding for-profit daycare centres with public subsidies, etc. become reasonable responses to strained budgets and a frustrated citizenry.

Harper's urban neglect has been particularly pronounced in the area of social policy, yet, apart from the New Deal aberration, this approach is as much a continuation of the federal Liberal legacies of the 1990s as it is a new path. Federal withdrawal from the social field has been highly problematic for Canadian cities. Cities and provinces are trying to contain these pressures through a rollout of targeted social services, investments in human capital development, and poverty management strategies. With socio-spatial polarization, increased inequality, intensifying poverty, homelessness, and the expansion of precarious employment, the fiscal burden on municipalities is tremendous.

## **MAKING MATTERS WORSE**

Harper has further exacerbated these problems, not only by killing the New

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Deal, but also by attacking progressive urban initiatives like Vancouver's safe injection site, which sought to popularize a harm-reduction approach to drug use and public health. In the area of child care, the Martin Liberal's Foundations program saw cities playing a key role in service design and delivery in a national early-childhood program. Harper cancelled the initiative in 2006, introduced the universal child care benefit to replace it, and cut out cities altogether. In addition, Harper's campaign against the Status of Women Canada has had direct urban consequences, closing 12 of 16 regional offices and cutting funds to women's NGOs, which both advocate and provide services such as rape crisis centres. On crime, Harper ignored the big-city mayors' call for a ban on handguns (led by Toronto's then mayor David Miller), while the government's recent sentencing reforms stand to negatively affect marginalized populations.

Cities had a central place in the stimulus program, which was acknowledged by Harper in a speech to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. However, the premature end to stimulus spending and the introduction of austerity measures signals that the federal-urban partnership was a one-off necessity and not the resurrection of the New Deal.

Philosophically, Harper is committed to "open federalism" and a respect for the constitutional jurisdiction that provinces have over cities. "Open federalism" facilitates the neoliberal project through place-based competition (province vs. province and city-region vs. city-region). While the Harper government may address certain urban issues

of federal jurisdiction, such as immigration settlement, it will do so in ways that see limited federal intervention into provincial/municipal spheres of governance. We can be sure that, unlike the New Deal, under Harper's watch there will be no exercise of the federal spending power to benefit cities. Harper has stated publicly, "Ottawa has stuck its nose into provincial and local matters into areas where they didn't have much expertise" (Prime Minister Harper, Federation of Canadian Municipalities, June 2, 2006).

## **HARPER'S ELECTORAL GAMBLE**

So what does the Ford victory in Toronto mean for Harper? Mike Harris and his former (and Harper's current) Finance Minister (and Ford "family friend") Jim Flaherty were among the 5,000 or so revellers who feted the new Toronto mayor on election night. If Harper can lose his rural and Western bias and steal a page from Rob Ford's book, he could form a majority. Especially if gains are made in suburban Ontario, in the soft edge of Toronto—both in the older suburbs and the 905 exurban regions around the city—as well as in suburban Quebec. In the 905 regions, the signs already point in this direction since Julian Fantino, a law-and-order conservative and former police chief in both Toronto and Ontario, won a prized Liberal stronghold in Vaughan, "the city above Toronto."

As for the city itself, the futility of past Conservative campaigns seems to make way for new hope for the provincial and federal Conservatives in the wake of the Ford electoral juggernaut. While Rob Ford's brother Doug has just been elected city councillor in Ford's old district, one of Ford's former mayoral competitors, Rocco Rossi, has already signed up with PC leader Tim Hudak's team in the Toronto riding of Eglinton-Lawrence for Ontario's forthcoming election campaign. Looking more closely at Ford's emerging administration after a little more than 100 days betrays some uncanny similarities with the way Harper

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does things in Ottawa. While Ford pretends to want to run Toronto in executive style like long-time conservative mayor Hazel McCallion's Mississauga, his brother Doug fantasizes about the Chicago model of strong mayoral politics.


### HARDBALL POLITICS: PLAYING FOR KEEPS

In true Harperian style, the big and potentially most controversial files, such as the subway extension instead of the light-rail-oriented Transit City plan or the proposal to privatize garbage collection, are handled on a short leash directly by the Ford brothers. In addition, reminiscent of how the Ottawa press corps has dealt with the prime minister, many pundits have played the role of embedded journalists in a war against all things Miller and all things progressive. With Sue-Ann Levy of the Toronto Sun leading the charge, other influential writers like Royson James have all but abdicated their fourth-estate prerogative of critical interrogation of power.

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Harper has played high-stakes poker throughout most of his two terms as minority leader of Canada. He may soon be able to see a payoff when he carries the Conservative standard down Yonge Street. Yet, things may all turn out differently.


The Harper-Hudak-Ford triumvirate may be just a Conservative pipe dream. We could, instead, end up with another and perhaps weaker Harper majority, a failed run to conquer Queen's Park by Hudak, and a lame-duck Mayor Ford who might stumble over a botched transit

proposal, intentional union-busting privatization plans, and make-rich programs for his friends in private business. Harper could lose his gamble for the urban voter and drag his provincial and municipal counterparts down with him. The fate of this scenario is highly dependent on whether the Liberals will (re)articulate an urban vision that moves beyond narrow anti-tax sentiments to address Canada's urban crisis, and whether a fickle electorate will buy into a more progressive urbanity than that symbolized by the politics of Ford and Harper. 

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urban seats, where they have been honing their appeal to ethnic voters. Or the Liberals may eventually begin to regain some of the support they have bled to the NDP or the Greens. However, all this

is for the future. As long as the Bloc Québécois can successfully mobilize Quebec nationalist support, minority Parliaments will remain the norm in our multinational federation. Canadians who

are centre or left-of-centre in their inclinations will, for the time being, have to continue to rely on the Bloc to shield them from the full impact of a potential majority Conservative government. 

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ranked 27th out of 30 OECD countries with respect to gender pay gaps. Similarly, Canada has plunged from 4th to 9th place among 14 comparable OECD countries on the UN Human Development Index. Canada now ranks dead last among 25 OECD countries with respect to early child care and development. This year, moreover, the UN Human Rights Council urged Ottawa to address the growing disparities between

minority groups and their mainstream counterparts in education, employment, income, housing, and political participation.

There is little doubt that the strategists in the Prime Minister's Office had already suspected that the 2011 long-form census would reveal to all Canadians and the world an increasingly frayed and inequitable social fabric. Canadians have a right to know whether social

disparities are growing and among which groups. Like the proverbial three monkeys that can neither see, hear, nor say evil, the cancellation of the long-form census is a cynical partisan ploy that seeks to entrench a climate of indifference to social inequalities and to effective social policies to combat them. This is a manufactured ignorance in the making, which, if met with silence and without solidarity, diminishes us all. 