

A New Role for Cities?

An interview with Jane Jacobs
by Charles Finley

In light of the recent public policy debates on creating a “new deal” for cities, we can reflect on the fact that this issue is not new. In this interview conducted in 2000, Jane Jacobs called for a different way of looking at cities and their governance.

Canada's largest cities have entered the discourse of both provincial and federal politics in recent years. Especially for the country's largest conurbations, the combination of burgeoning populations and the offloading of provincial social and funding responsibilities to municipal governments have severely limited their ability to maintain social and transportation services and infrastructure. In Toronto, this situation was exacerbated by the upheavals associated with the forced amalgamation of the core city with its immediate suburbs in the late 1990's.

The election of more activist municipal governments in Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver in 2001-3 has meant that cities have taken a larger role in lobbying governments for more funding and taxation powers. Urban issues have reappeared on the agenda of political discourse on the federal and provincial levels and, in the short term, senior governments have responded with limited and temporary transfers of funding to the municipal level. The provision of long term solutions, however, has yet to be seen.

In 1999 a group of people passionate about the city of Toronto met to prepare the Toronto Charter, an exploration of alternative models of governance for the region. In preparation, participants submitted papers to help frame the discussion. These papers were published in 2000 as *Toronto: Considering Self Government*. Jane Jacobs was part of the Toronto Charter group and contributed a paper to the work. Interviewed in 2000, Jacobs reminds us that questions of urban governance were originally framed in terms of changes of overall relationship of cities to senior governments, rather than the simple variances in funding formulas that are being presented as solutions in 2004.

Jane Jacobs: Toronto is stuck with the unequal relationship between the province and its municipalities, and this holds the same truth throughout Canada, really. It was set more than a century ago, when this was really an agrarian country and the municipalities were very small and weak and inexperienced.

Charles Finley: Is this the source of the adage that cities are the creatures of the province?

JJ: Yes they were the children of the superior government but this has changed. We are an urban country now and there is such a thing as the City of Toronto, which is bigger than most of the provinces, has all of the expertise among its citizens that are needed for governance and for the technical things that a good city has to use and know. It is absurd to have this relationship continue. It is not only absurd, it defies common sense now. But it's very destructive the reason that the city - and this is one sore point that of course keeps coming up - the city doesn't have any power to raise money by taxation except for the property tax. Now times have changed. All kinds of things are loaded on the property tax that have nothing to do with how much property taxes can sustain.

CF: One thing we like to see is that the city government is closer to the people than the province. If Toronto assumed some of the responsibilities of a senior government do you think in some ways it might move away from the people?

JJ: No, this is one of the problems too. The localities within a city lose out as localities if they can't assume responsibilities they ought to have. If there is only one large city below the province, made up of parts that used to be self-governing to quite an extent that have just melted into an amorphous whole through amalgamation, then the entire thing sometimes seems like a black hole. So this is another one of the great problems that has arisen; there were no such large cities [as Toronto] back when the relationship was set. It is the antithesis if the entity is too large.

CF: If Toronto takes on the powers of a province how would that look?

JJ: It wouldn't be exactly the powers of a province. This is one of the things we are groping for. What kind of a unit should it be? The consensus among the people who have been thinking about it so far is that it ought to have a special charter. A city charter is a very old and venerable institution.

CF: Like the Vancouver Charter, like that kind of idea?

JJ: Well no. There isn't any charter like this one yet.

CF: I know that Vancouver has a special Charter that gives it special powers that the other municipalities in B.C. don't have, as a former resident of Vancouver.

JJ: Yes, oh, I have a son who lives there. It's a wonderful city.

CF: For example, when the government of British Columbia was looking at changing the relationship with the Pacific National Exhibition, the city said the province couldn't actually make any decisions over that space because it was in the Vancouver Charter. Would this be a type of middle ground between the power of the municipality and the idea of Toronto becoming a province? Or some kind of mix of these powers, would that be the idea?

JJ: And that is what this book [*Toronto: Considering Self Government*] is about, the first gropings about this. People are trying to think it out and right now the tentative charter is being worked out, what powers there should be and what responsibilities. But something has to change. I am a great believer in "if it ain't broke don't fix it," but this is broken.

CF: There seems to be a lot of questioning about what is going to happen with the Toronto waterfront and the mishmash of governmental responsibilities there. A lot of people are thinking that there has to be some change in the stalemate there. Do you think that would tie in? If Toronto wanted to do a project like the waterfront project and it wasn't part of Ontario anymore do you think it could raise the money?

JJ: Well what would have to come with this would be new powers of the city to raise money. It raises the money now but it all goes to the province and the federal government.

CF: And then they administer the funds.

JJ: Yes, as if the city were a minor child which is what the legal relationship actually is.

CF: Jane Jacobs, thank you.

JJ: Thank you very much.