

National Goals for the Urban Environment – A Democratic Society: Notes for an Address to the Town Planning Institute of Canada National Conference, Edmonton, July 21, 1970

by Lloyd Axworthy
1970

The Institute of Urban Studies





THE UNIVERSITY OF
WINNIPEG

FOR INFORMATION:

The Institute of Urban Studies

The University of Winnipeg
599 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg
phone: 204.982.1140
fax: 204.943.4695
general email: ius@uwinnipeg.ca

Mailing Address:

The Institute of Urban Studies

The University of Winnipeg
515 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9

NATIONAL GOALS FOR THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT – A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY: NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS TO THE TOWN PLANNING INSTITUTE OF CANADA NATIONAL CONFERENCE, EDMONTON, JULY 21, 1970

Published 1970 by the Institute of Urban Studies, University of Winnipeg
© **THE INSTITUTE OF URBAN STUDIES**

Note: The cover page and this information page are new replacements, 2016.

The Institute of Urban Studies is an independent research arm of the University of Winnipeg. Since 1969, the IUS has been both an academic and an applied research centre, committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan manner. The Institute examines inner city, environmental, Aboriginal and community development issues. In addition to its ongoing involvement in research, IUS brings in visiting scholars, hosts workshops, seminars and conferences, and acts in partnership with other organizations in the community to effect positive change.

HT
169
.C32
W585
no. 248
C.3

Notes For An Address

to

TOWN PLANNING INSTITUTE OF CANADA

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

EDMONTON - July 21, 1970

NATIONAL GOALS FOR THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

- A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Lloyd Axworthy
Director
Institute of Urban Studies
University of Winnipeg

Canadians are not very good at developing or articulating what they believe to be the basic goals and commitments for their nation. Unlike the Americans who began with the stirring Declaration of Independence and who now resort to various Presidential Commissions on National Goals, which print the findings in Life Magazine, we have never seemed to have the talent for defining for ourselves a set of purposes to openly guide public policy, and which act as measures of success or failure in what we do.

This does not mean that there are no national goals. Tucked away in some speeches, implicit in some Cabinet memoranda and coded in some short phrase such as "Just Society", are ideals and ambitions held by men of power and position. And of course, there has been a selection of urban environmental goals very evident in the actual programmes and policies implemented by various levels of government. Every amendment to the National Housing Act, a decision to build more public housing, a plan for downtown development results from someone's judgement as to what the commitments and goals of the community should be. So, it is not a question that Canadians do not have national goals; it is just a matter of their being hard to find - particularly when it comes to determining goals for the urban environment.

In one way, I'm a little surprised that planners are raising this question at their convention. If there is any group that appears to have a firm idea of goals for the environment, it is the planning profession - at least that is the impression one gets. Certainly in your task of prescribing plans and programmes, there must be some sense of what the public interest is, what the community commitments are, ^{and} what the nation should be doing in the urban areas.

In fact, I would suggest that if there is any one group which has had a hand in shaping the national goals we possess, it has been members of your profession, or those closely allied to it. The provisions of the National Housing Act, particularly as it reads in matters of urban

development, research and social housing have been the product of a very small group of influential professional people who have orbited in the field of urban planning and administration. It would be an error to assume for one moment that politicians, or elected representatives have had much to do, except in perhaps in a negative way, in formulating and initiating whatever directions are apparent in existing legislation and programmes. Until very recently, the Federal Cabinet and even the Minister directly responsible, were quite unconcerned with the state of urban affairs.

A reading of Albert Rose's short history of housing and urban development legislation, prepared for the Canadian Conference on Housing confirms this point of view. The push for public housing, the introduction of measures for slum clearance, and certainly the 1964 amendments were not based on any wide-spread public demand, national debate or cry for reform. They were primarily the products of professionals. Those working within C.M.H.C., those in municipal government, those in the various chapters of planning organizations in cities across Canada, these were the initiators.

Similar evidence of this was found by the Hellyer Task Force. It was obvious that the federal programs in effect at that time were the off-spring of the professionals and were favoured by most officials engaged in planning the urban environment or by those who benefited by the largess of the programmes, such as downtown developers, local politicians and club ladies who desired new culture - emporiums. It was also obvious that these feelings were not shared by a large number of citizens who found that renewal, public housing and the like were decidedly mixed blessings.

The point is that those goals that did influence public policy in the urban environment were limited in scope, and reflected a small selected range of interests. To quickly summarize, here is the basic intent of these goals of national policy action for the urban environment over the last two decades. They would be:

- 1) new homes for the middle class
- 2) physical redevelopment of central downtown areas for the benefit of selected portions of middle and upper income Canadians
- 3) housing assistance for the low-income in the form of public housing, which is the most paternalistic form of assistance
- 4) treatment of sewage, not pollution
- 5) limited research

These goals were not bad. They inspired some remarkable achievements in the last twenty years. But they are in no way complete, nor do they represent the full range of interests, ideals and needs of Canadians. The reason why our goals for the urban environment have been limited and restricted is because they have been determined by a small and limited group of people. There has not been a wide-scale participation in the setting of these goals nor a wide scale acceptance. They cannot really be called national, because they are not based on any wide consensus of informed citizens.

This however, is about to change. This summer of 1970 is a good time for your profession to re-open the question of national goals for the environment. It is time for ^adeliberate movement towards a different set of values and commitments in this country. There are very significant events taking place that are compelling old truths to be discarded and new truths to be discovered.

To begin with there is the general awakening to the fact of our urbanization. For the last decade, signs and signals have been issued that we were becoming an urban nation. In its Fourth Annual Review, the Economic Council told Canadians that we were urbanizing faster than any other industrial nation, and prophesied the day when over 1/3 of all citizens would reside in three large cities. Only a slight stir of interest greeted the announcement. Complacency, however, is now giving way to revelation.

We now sense that major forces are at work, which are changing the face of Canada and we are doing little to master them. The former slight inconveniences of city life are becoming serious obstacles. The impact of great numbers of people, populating small areas of space, threaten to imbalance nature, economic patterns and social stability. The reality of urbanization is beginning to touch the lives of large numbers of Canadians.

With this new found awareness have come a new host of Jeremiahs who know a fashionable issue when they see one. Professional critics who two years ago were writing in Saturday Night or Macleans about the evils of foreign ownership, now use the same words to bemoan the fate of our cities.

Yet this is a healthy happening. It has opened for review the question of how we have been managing the urban environment, and often the institutions, practices and programmes have been found seriously wanting. To plan a new sub-division, to lay down a new expressway or to pass a municipal bylaw on zoning is to expect some serious questions to be raised. Urban government is no longer the quiet caretaker that turns on the lights at 7 p.m. and insures that the snow is cleared. Provincial governments are being asked to live up to their constitutional responsibilities - not with talk but with action. The federal government has found that many of its long nurtured mythologies about its role in the cities don't make sense.

This awakening of inquiry is abetted by new knowledge. We are now beginning to learn how to analyse and treat urban problems in a more critical, ^{and} comprehensive fashion. The social consequences of physical change, the relation of man to space, the dynamics of urban economics, the indicators of external effects of everything from highway construction to discussing the monthly welfare cheque, introduce new ingredients into the making of public policies. The interdependency of social, financial and physical planning is apparent. What is not nearly available is the men and techniques required to bring it about. Ideas, theories and analysis are appearing in abundance, ^{but} what is missing are the methods of implementation.

The requirements for an advanced state of knowledge and analysis runs up against an even more profound kind of influence. There are now many new voices demanding to be heard in the making of decisions in the urban arena. Policy can no longer be made in a closed shop. The determination of goals, issues, and policies is being forced out of the private preserve of small handfuls of public officials, influential pressure groups, and established experts.

Note the takeover of the last meeting of the Canada Welfare Council by the poor. For years it was the social workers and their allies who spoke for the poor, now the poor are prepared to do it themselves. Note the dismay of city governments as citizens groups march into council chambers and refuse to accept the benign indifference of their government to their interests. Notice the new found militancy of everybody from school teachers to high school students.

Whether you are in favour of these movements or not, they are happening. Hence forward, the multiplication of interests wanting to compete and become involved will become more of a fact. The basic decisions of what we are going to do, and how we are going to do it must take this fact into account. The system of decision-making is going to contain many more participants. Therefore, the ways and means of bringing the new interests together, of giving them proper access, and of sharing power must be resolved, so that decisions can be made. Any attempt to ignore the new urban voices and carry on in the old ways is an invitation to trouble.

This then is a hasty sketch of the new national environment. It is not, you will have noticed, a physical profile. It encompasses the total environment. Greater numbers of people competing for small amounts of space, a widening base of knowledge, a new spirit of inquiry, the obsolescence of many basic institutions, the growing ferment of groups of previously silent people. It is an environment of intense interaction between man, nature, his physical artifacts, his thoughts, attitudes and feelings - a pulsating human environment.

What are the goals to fit this new, altered environment? The natural temptation in answering such a question is to reach into the shopping bag of sure-fire solutions and present a personal selection of favourite cures for easing the nation's ills. There could be a number of prescriptions offered:

- 1) a basic commitment to decently house every Canadian as outlined in the Task Force Report, but yet to be adopted by the federal government, coupled with a balanced housing policy offering a range of alternatives in support and subsidy.
- 2) The objective of public ownership and control of urban space.
- 3) Decentralization of the growing concentrations of urban settlement, by using deliberate policies of incentive and penalties, and new city development.
- 4) A commitment to reduce the numbers of poor Canadians perhaps to the extent of reserving the annual increase of GNP for the next ten years for such a purpose.

This kind of exercise, though, doesn't mean very much. Important as they are, these are secondary goals. Everyone here can come forward with his own pet schemes for salvation. To offer any shopping list of priorities to you is like trying to sell just one true interpretation of scripture to a convention of evangelists.

There is however, one objective that I do want to set forth, and argue for its absolute necessity. It is an objective that we often overlook because we take it for granted. But it is essential to affirm its primacy in light of the kind of environment in which we now exist.

It is a very simple goal - to create a democratic society in our urban areas.

The highest priority for this nation in dealing with the environment is to build a system where people can fully and actively participate in the basic decisions for planning and executing changes in the urban setting.

This appears commonplace - who would argue? But the truth is that our present practices and our existing institutions are not very democratic. Decisions are made by small coterie of influentials; there is limited access to the forums of decision-making; ^{and} there are large numbers of people who have no power to act.

We delude ourselves with rhetoric about our democratic way of life, while we practice an advanced form of technocracy. This is not done willfully; there is no subversive conspiracy to wreck democratic ideals. It is simply a result of events overtaking institutions ^{and} of an indifference on the part of those who now exercise power to attempt any corrections.

For example, our institutions of local government were devised in the nineteenth century, and have been only moderately amended since that time. Yet the volume of government business, the flow of information, the variety of tasks have increased multi-fold, without accompanying adaptations.

Our representative chambers, our political parties, the devices that we proclaim provide access to the system, provide it only in an intermittent way ^{and} on some occasions. Have you ever tested just how much contact the citizen of a large city has with his alderman, assuming he knows his name. As Roscoe Martin pointed out in his book the "Grass Roots" - the level of government furthest away from most citizens is city hall. And as Emmet Redford points out in his study of democracy in the Administrative State -

"Election of representatives or referendum have always been recognized as key means of access for the citizen. But more participation than this will be necessary to implement democratic morality in an administered society".

There is a fundamental issue in balance - that everyone involved in thinking, planning or executing urban matters must face - how to meet the requirements of advanced, sophisticated, complicated decisions to cope with demands of an urban society - with the need to have participation and involvement of citizens in the construction of the urban environment. Perhaps Wentworth Aldridge of Dartmouth used more straight-forward terms at the 1960 American Institute of Planners Convention, when he said -

"Professional Administration (rule by experts) versus participatory democracy (planning with people) is the dilemma of the late twentieth century".

It is an issue of national importance. It is not one that can be or should be confined to the local level. That is where the fight is now taking place. It is in the local arena that the demands for participation are being heard and the counter reactions being felt. But it is an issue of pre-eminence for our federal government because it involves ultimately the fate of the majority of Canadians living in the cities.

So, it is their responsibility. The imperative of "peace, order and good government" as I read it, means that our national government must be the guardians of a democratic order. Whether you interpret the situation in the cities to be an emergency or not, the federal government has as first order of business to insure the rights of citizens. These rights must be defined in operative ways - not how they sound in theory, but how do they work in practice.

What are the rights?

1) There is the right to know. This means that every man has a right to be alerted to activity that affects his interests. In one of the areas in Winnipeg where our Institute has been working, we found a meagre minority of people/^{who}knew anything at all, about major plans that had been made in regards to new transportation routes, expansion of a hospital, removal of a public library, yet they all seriously affected

that community. Nor is it enough for planners to say that a plan was published and hearings held - because these are techniques that fit only the articulate, organized portion of the population.

(2) There is the right to access. This can't be defined simply by saying that the mayor's door is always open or by setting up perfunctory advisory groups of citizens. It must be access at both those times and places where actual critical decisions are made, not consultation after plans are already determined. This calls for a new order of institutions. Neighbourhood development corporations, where planning is done by citizens and when to use Wolf Von Echhardt's phrase - government might get involved with the process of citizen decision-making, not the other way around. These are small beginnings in forming structures for planning and executing when development that changes the traditional relationships and strange dicotomy between public and private. There should be nothing sacrosanct about existing techniques or organizations. After all, we no longer fly DC-3's. Yet, one of the most neglected concerns in urban planning and policy-making - is the construction of different, more effective - more democratic tools of implementation.

(3) Then there is the right to fair forum. The opportunity to present one's case is meaningless if the decision or action which follows is made a forum which is closed or prejudiced against consideration of the interest asserted. What chance does the immigrant family have or the individual who doesn't have middle-class verbal skills to compete in the arena of decision-making. How can John Q. Citizen get a fair hearing when he doesn't have a computer, 2 million dollars of planning time, and the necessary information to back up his point of view. Planners, and professionals have been "hired-guns" for business and government - they must go wider-afield to serve the public interest.

If it is the federal government's responsibility to serve these rights; they are also in the best position to do so. They have the benefit of distance and insulation from the movement for greater citizen participation, therefore are in a better position to support it. We are now witnessing in Canada what the Americans went through a few years ago. The cities are afraid of the citizen groups. They either try to stop them or they co-opt them. But. they rarely will tolerate the existence

of independent groups of citizens involved in planning and execution. Just recently the Executive Committee of Toronto City Council asked the federal government to stop aiding independent citizens groups. In other cities there is a similar, if less antagonistic attitude. It bears out the truth of Kenneth Clark's observation of what happened in twelve American cities when community action projects challenged city governments -

"The factor of political control is inevitable. It is not likely that even in the most effective of these programs of independent citizen involvement, that political and government officials will permit any type of program which would directly or indirectly threaten the maintenance of their own power"

If the movement to greater democratization is to succeed - if this is considered of national importance, then the federal government must be prepared to support these new coalitions of citizen interests, it must encourage challenges to existing institutions, financing of experiments with new forms of organization, and give its blessings to the initiative of genuine citizens movements. The American federal government caved in. It will be an interesting test of the resolve of our own government, to see which side they land on.

If they are prepared to encourage the mobilization of privately inspired citizen groups, not government organized bodies which are akin to company unions, then they will sufficiently revolutionize local government to the point where support will no longer be needed. There is an existing possibility of new political forces emerging out of this present ferment. Given the time, and resources they will succeed in re-writing the way we organize and manage our urban affairs. There can be a total revision of the urban network - the form of representation - the share and distribution of power - the techniques of planning and the allocation of resources.

The federal government, is itself not free of the need for similar reforms. Many of those reforms are now taking place in terms of

better co-ordination, better analysis of programs, ^{and} wider consideration of policy alternatives. Perhaps the greatest danger in this revision is that it will lead to government becoming too efficient, ^{and} too organized. The times call for flexibility, for programs not tied to formulae, but dependent upon discretion. Administrative efficiency, good economic forecasts, ^{and} rational management, should take second place to policies that promote a greater degree of democratic control, access of more citizens, ^{and} freedom to explore new ideas and institutions. Mitchell Svirldorf, one of the great enterprising urban entrepreneurs wisely has said "Participation by the people is more to be desired than expertise, efficiency in government, a higher housing rate or better planned cities".

But is it? There are many, perhaps many of you, who contend that what is needed is less democracy and more getting on with the job. There is already too much time consumed in honouring democratic niceties, when there are many problems crying for solution. If there has to be elitism to do the job, then it is worth the price.

That is an understandable, but unwise philosophy. The reason that urban democracy should be the number one goal for planning the environment is because it is the best means of addressing the problem. To continue as is/ ^{and} to strengthen ever further the dominance of elites is destructive.

Robert Aleshire who has examined the American experience with community action, ^{that} points out/ the major benefit of citizens participation begins with the fact that participation is a right in itself. As the society grows large and the individual more anonymous, it becomes one of the new rights. A second benefit is that it represents a check and balance against the elitist or technocratic theorist. Increased involvement of citizens can often save the community from the decision of the technician or professional which may produce irrelevant and unresponsive action. It is also a way of giving individuals a sense of worth. Powerlessness demeans, participation gives dignity. It is also a way

of properly establishing community priorities. If some groups are missing from the arena of decision-making which is now the case, then the priorities that emerge will not represent a true public interest. Tied to this is that it is a better way of raising and debating important ^{issues} /something that political parties do not do. It also unifies planning. The citizen has an integrated life. It is not separated into physical, social ^{and} /economic components. Therefore he might give a perspective often missing from the vertical plans/^{and programs} now made by government.

Finally, the advancement and extension of the democratic process will endow this nation with one quality which it greatly lacks - a sense of community. We can see the signs of community erosion all around us. Every group - linguistic, racial, economic or social in origin is retreating into its own cave - the community be damned.

Helping citizens establish a sense of community with which they can identify and one which they can exercise meaningful influence over is a critical requirement of our age. A change in the way we make decisions and plan for people is one important means to achieve this goal.

We need new forms of government that operate on the community level. The ad hoc exercise of demonstration or citizens groups is doomed to failure/^{and} will peter out unless mechanisms are available through which small neighbourhood communities can exercise power. It is amazing, the time and words that have been spent debating regional government, when perhaps the far more critical questions of government reorganization to achieve a greater democratic involvement has been at stake.

So in this preliminary sketchy way is what I think to be the basic goal of our urban environment. It does not aim at the kinds of decisions we need to make, but more at the way we make decisions. This will then insure that whatever goals eventually emerge will be based on full representation and wide acceptance. It is not a goal that anyone, at least in public, will disagree with. But, we deny it everyday that we allow the present system to operate. We may believe in a democratic philosophy, but we do not have the forms of government or procedures of

administration to fully carry it out. The reason we don't have these is that we do not have a national strategy for citizen participation or democratic planning. The reason why we don't have a strategy is because those who have previously determined goals and strategy on the national level were not interested.

But in saying that, I can also see that this is no longer the case. The belief in self-determination and open democratic planning and management is gaining credence and a following. It is impelled by the recognition that the basic theorem of Aristotle, is once again making sense; that "if you want to know if the shoe fits, ask the man who wears it, not the man who made it". But it is also based on the stark fact realized by more and more people, that unless we put our mind to it, ^{and} develop a new commitment to democratic goals and make the necessary changes, then democracy in the urban age will not survive.