

ST 34: Former les  lus: repenser la relation entre l gitimit  d mocratique et expertise

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“The ‘Training’ of Municipal Councillors: Professionalization in a Mid-sized Canadian City”

Most municipal councillors in Canada operate within non-partisan systems in which they have no executive responsibilities. Except for a very few within our largest cities, they are not expected to work full-time as councillors, and they are certainly not paid at a level commensurate with any kind of sophisticated corporate responsibility. These facts might well lead observers to believe that Canadian municipal councillors are “lay amateurs” rather than “professionals” (Steyvers and Verhelst 2012) who do not require any form of training in order to do what they were elected to do. By focusing on developments in one of Ontario’s major cities, this paper aims both to determine the extent to which the position of municipal councillor has been “professionalized” and to explore the limited opportunities that are available for councillors to understand what their position entails.

The first part of this paper focuses on whether or not the position of municipal councillor should be considered a full-time or part-time position, an issue that is intimately linked to professionalization and to the nature of local democracy. The second part examines the extent to which “training” for the role of municipal councillor is possible and desirable. The third part examines prospects for “professionalization”. Examples will be taken from London, Ontario, a mid-sized Canadian city of about 370,000 people in southwestern Ontario. Except when noted otherwise, London will be considered broadly representative of cities in Canadian provinces other than Quebec.

Full-time or part-time

The notion of the “lay amateur” in municipal government is appealing: public-spirited citizens from diverse walks of life offer themselves for election; successful candidates carry on with their normal daily activities, adding to their routines the relatively limited workload that comes with being a municipal councillor. Such a picture is reminiscent of the ancient Greek city-states and New England town meetings, the main difference being that municipal councils are representative bodies rather than examples of any form of direct democracy. But a potential problem for democratic decision-making is that “lay amateurs” in non-partisan systems have no apparent incentive to respond to constituents’ demands, because they appear to have nothing to lose from not being re-elected. The absence of obvious incentives to be responsive undermines

the theories on which representative democracy is based. Paul E. Peterson controversially addressed this issue in *City Limits* in 1981. In contrast to local politicians, he writes:

Washington politicians are forced to make a full-time career out of politics, and to continue that career, they must be constantly concerned about reelection....The local politician more often regards his public office as occupying a position secondary to the activity that provides for most of his livelihood....

Since local politicians are not as ambitious as national politicians, they do not have the same incentive to establish mechanisms of communication with voters and groups. At the same time, groups attempting to influence local decisions will be frustrated because politicians may not care what they want (Peterson 1981,125-7)

Peterson considers the possibility that some aspiring politicians might see local office as “a staircase to higher office” (128). But he quotes Raymond Wolfinger as discovering (in 1974) that “Municipal government is the least useful pathway to higher office. (126)” Whether this finding is true for Canada in the 21st Century is not clear. But even if it is not true, it seems unlikely that most municipal councillors are motivated to be responsive to citizen demands primarily because they one day want to seek higher office.

For some municipal councillors, the incentive to be responsive and get re-elected may well derive from the modest salary levels attached to their jobs, levels that are usually justified on the grounds that the position is supposed to be part-time. For councillors without independent means or other remunerative careers, these salaries might well make the difference between just scraping by and a modestly comfortable standard of living. Such people are precisely the ones most likely to claim that the job is really full-time and that it should be compensated for accordingly. In large cities (notably Toronto), where the job is undoubtedly full-time and annual councillors salaries are 105,000 CAD plus benefits¹, the material incentives for most incumbents to be responsive are obvious.

It is well-known that incumbents in non-partisan elections tend to get re-elected, except in circumstances when they have been the recipients of clearly adverse publicity (Oliver 2012). This raises an obvious question: Why do incumbents bother to run for re-election if the rewards for doing so are generally low. This question has recently been addressed in the American suburban context by J. Eric Oliver, who received survey responses in 2008 from 354 Chicago-area municipal officeholders and 58 defeated candidates. Notably, only 13 percent of the respondents were from “large” suburbs with populations of over 50,000 (Oliver 2012, 97). Also significant was that half the respondents who were councillors stated that they spent less than ten hours a week on municipal business. Not surprisingly then, it appears that the respondents who ran for office seemed to think of council service as a kind of extension of other forms of voluntary community service.

Nearly half the respondents reported running because either because of a sense of civic duty or because they first worked in affiliated community organization. One of the most common explanations was that they “owed something to the community” or that it “was a

¹ <http://www1.toronto.ca/wps/portal/contentonly?vgnextoid=29032704635c0410VgnVCM10000071d60f89RCRD>

civic obligation.” Although the self-serving nature of such responses might elicit some skepticism, this was an anonymous survey and respondents had little reason to promote their own self-image (Oliver 2012, 101).

Oliver goes on to arrive at a conclusion that, for a contemporary American political scientist, is quite remarkable: “What sustains most politicians are the *intrinsic* benefits to holding office: the idea of serving their communities or to correct a perceived injustice or problem in their communities. For this civic elite, local politics and governing is a calling (115)”. Such people run for re-election in their relatively small suburbs because being on municipal council makes them feel good. Usually they win.

Except in the suburbs of Montreal, Vancouver, and Victoria, there are very few suburban municipalities of the kind that Oliver studied around Chicago. Oliver’s findings are perhaps irrelevant in the Canadian context – but they do at least demonstrate that the conception of the community-serving, amateur part-time municipal councillor can and does still exist. One of the (presumably) unintended consequences of all the municipal amalgamations experienced in most parts of Canada over the past fifty years has been to largely eliminate such people from municipal office. Municipal amalgamations, almost by definition, mean that the number of councillors will be reduced and the workload of the remaining ones will be increased, thereby leading to claims that the job has become, or should become, “professionalized”.

London, Ontario has grown in size through both small and large annexations rather than through the kinds of legislated amalgamations experienced in Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec (Sancton 2015a, ch.8). Nevertheless, because of the annexations, all of its surrounding municipalities are primarily rural. There are no suburbs of the kind studied by Oliver. With its population of 370,000 and its economic role as the hub of southwestern Ontario it is a significant Canadian city. But it is certainly not so large that everyone recognizes that being a municipal councillor should be a full-time job. In fact, there has been a vibrant debate in the city about this issue for more than forty years.

In 1976 a citizens’ committee charged by the city council with investigating the city’s “policy-making institutions” concluded the following about municipal councillors:

It is the function of a representative government to reflect varying points of view, and this is most likely to occur with representation from the broadest spectrum of personal backgrounds. Elected office, therefore, should be made as available as possible to all walks of life and the form of government should avoid mechanisms which discriminate against occupational groups. To ensure this principle, the function of an elected office should normally be considered a part-time employment in which interference with the primary occupations or careers of the elected people is kept to a minimum. (London 1976, 10)

The committee went on to recommend that financial remuneration should fully compensate councillors for their time and energy spent on municipal business but should not be so high as to cause people to seek public office as their “sole occupation” (London 1976, 11).

For the next twenty years there were frequent council debates about remuneration with much of the discussion focussing on the amount of time that councillors needed to carry out their

duties. Frequent claims were made that some councillors worked more than forty hours a week for remuneration that was supposed to reflect a part-time position. In 1996 a citizens' "task force" appointed by city council addressed the full-time vs. part-time issue. It arrived at conclusions similar to the 1976 committee:

Maintaining the part-time nature of positions on City Council is important to not restrict the pool of interested political candidates. A part-time position on City Council allows elected officials to have other interests in the community which can only serve to strengthen the representativeness of Council Members. Part-time status is consistent with the policy-making role of Council Members whereas a full-time position would conceivably result in more daily Management of the Municipality by individual elected officials. This would conflict with the role of senior administration (London 1996, Recommendation 1)

In 2002 a frustrated London councillor launched a public crusade to reduce the size of the city council from nineteen to eleven and to make it clear that all of the eleven would be expected to be full-time councillors. He turned the previous arguments about this issue on their head. Not paying councillors full-time salaries drastically restricted the number of people who could serve on council. Because councillors are part-time they cannot adequately monitor senior management, thereby resulting in a number of well publicized problems with which the city had recently been coping.

Important decisions are made with too little consideration or incessantly delayed because city business comes in second to other demands in the lives of some members. Many councillors are challenged to be fully prepared for the meetings and are not in a position to ask any of the right questions (London 2002, 12-13).

Although there was much subsequent conflict in London about the size and composition of the city council, the issue of making changes so as to encourage full-time councillors was never explicitly addressed. The councillor who launched the crusade did not run again, was admitted to law school, and is now an associate in a major London-based law firm. In 2008 yet another citizens' task force concluded that "council members should continue to be able to balance a full-time job in the community with their Council responsibilities" but this could only be possible with enhanced "administrative support" at city hall (London 2008, Mandate 4).

A similar task force in 2013 hired a consultant to interview councillors about their jobs. The consultants reported that the councillors were divided on the issue of full-time or part-time, but most recorded comments seemed to favour full-time status and higher remuneration. One stated:

Councillors are expected to reply to emails, phone calls and text from constituents, days, evenings, weekends and all hours – well over and above the 9 to 5 standard. They have to give up their personal lives to serve the public 24/7. There are multiple requests for personal appearances, along with numerous requests for help with all sorts of issues and matters, which should be included in the Compensation Review Committee's considerations. London is a full time City with full time problems, needing a full time Council (London 2013, A-18).

“Training” or Orientation

The results of the 2014 municipal election in London, Ontario led to the largest turnover in council membership that anyone can remember. Of the fifteen council members prior to the election, only four were re-elected; one of these was a one-term councillor who was elected mayor. If ever there was a situation in which some form of “training” or intensive orientation might seem necessary, this would be it.² The new councillors were anxious to get prepared for office during the period between their election on October 27 and their inaugural meeting on December 1. There was confusion about the official role of the councillors-elect, including what access to information, technology and other resources would be appropriate during this time. Prior to inauguration, the council-elect has no official status in Ontario, but the period between the election and inauguration is a unique opportunity to support the leadership transition by providing an orientation program. The Mayor, City Manager, and staff developed a voluntary orientation program including three separate “modules”, to be delivered for about three hours weekly on three Thursdays in November.

Much of the first module summarizes material covered in a provincial publication, *The Municipal Councillor’s Guide 2014*, to which the written material in the module refers. The *Guide* is quite detailed and carefully approaches some delicate issues about councillors’ roles. It states that “you have three main roles to play in your municipality: a representative, a policy-making and a stewardship role. These roles may often overlap (Ontario 2014, 5).” As a “representative”, councillors are told that they must decide about the balance between expressing their own considered and informed views or representing the apparent majority position of their constituents. Concerning constituency “casework”, the *Guide* makes these important statements:

Understandably, you will want to try to help your constituents. However, be sure to familiarize yourself with any policies or protocols that your municipality may have for handling public complaints and inquiries. Although you may want to find some way of helping, remember to consult municipal staff.

There may also be circumstances where decisions are made by designated staff who operate at arm’s length from the municipality, and where it could be inappropriate for elected officials to interfere or be seen to be interfering. Examples of this would include decisions made by the fire chief, the chief building official or the medical officer of health.

A councillor who has made promises that cannot be kept may lose credibility with the public and strain the working relationship with staff. If your municipality does not have a policy for handling public inquiries, complaints, and frequently asked questions, you may want to consider working with council and staff to develop such a policy (Ontario 2014, 6).

As “policy-makers”, councillors are briefly instructed on the main stages (theoretical and practical) of the policy-making process. On the age-old question of the difference between

² For a similar argument about the need for intensive orientation after a large turnover in the British House of Commons, see Fox and Korris 2012.

policy and administration, they are told that “Although staff is responsible for implementing a policy, your council may wish to develop appropriate reporting mechanisms to help ensure that the policies are being carried out as intended, and as effectively as possible (Ontario 2014, 7).” Such advice is also clearly linked to their role as “stewards”.

The *Guide* (42) also refers to the Municipal Conflict of Interest Act and municipal codes of conduct. Both these matters were also the subject of Module 1 of London’s councillor orientation. Given that most of the new councillors won election on platforms emphasizing the need for more openness and better conduct, it is unlikely that they learned anything here that they did not already know about from doing research in preparation for their campaigns.

Module 1 contains a section “A Day in the Life” of a municipal councillor. The written material states:

On any given day you might expect the following types of activities:

- Communicating with constituents
- Responding to inquiries and issues
- Attending Council meetings
- Attending and/or chairing committee meetings
- Attending meetings of agencies, boards, and commissions
- Meeting with citizens, community groups or others
- Meeting with City staff
- Reading reports and preparing for meetings
- Communicating with media
- Speaking at or attending community events

The volume of information – sometimes hundreds of pages of agendas, reports, studies and other material every week – can quickly feel overwhelming. Additionally you may receive several hundred emails, dozens of calls, other communications such as through social media or text message, and media inquiries nearly every day (London 2014, 7). (p.7)

Significantly, the document makes no reference to how much time it might take in “any given day” to carry out these tasks.

Modules 2 and 3 of the orientation program all involved providing information to councillors about existing facilities and policies within the city of London. Councillors were encouraged to make use of existing staff mechanisms for handling citizen inquiries and complaints but there were no instructions about how to act as a councillor, other than not to act illegally by, for example, attempting to influence the work of building officials or by trying to “fix” parking tickets. The city provided no information to incoming councillors about orientation sessions offered by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)³, presumably on the grounds that such sessions were mainly designed for rural and small-town municipalities.

³ <http://www.amo.on.ca/AMO-Content/Events/2015-Councillor-Training-101.aspx>

London’s orientation sessions for councillors in 2014 were probably just as much about “team-building” as they were about trying to shape the councillors’ perspectives about their jobs. Although staff prepared the written material and did most of the organizing, the mayor-elect was the driving force. It was very much in his interests for the new councillors to get to know each other and to be able to begin to work effectively as soon as the councillors were sworn in. Module 2 involved a bus tour of major city facilities. As the councillors-elect toured the city together providing photo-ops for the local media, what better way to demonstrate that a new, cohesive group of decision-makers was now in charge?

Pressures for full-time councillors and professionalization

It is significant that most of the limited literature about the professionalization of local elected officials focuses on “executive members.” With the possible exception of members of the executive committees in major Quebec municipalities, the only possible “executive members” in Canadian municipalities are mayors, all of whom are directly elected. But even mayors in Canada have, in formal terms at least, limited executive authority. The Ontario Municipal Act⁴ (s.225(a)) states that mayors are the “chief executive officers” of their municipalities but the same Act (s.229(a)) also states that, when a council appoints a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), that person will exercise “general control and management of the affairs of the municipality for the purpose of ensuring the efficient and effective operation of the municipality.” Furthermore, the province’s *Municipal Councillor’s Guide* states that “decisions of the municipality are made by council as a whole. Generally, the head of council [mayor] does not have any more power than any other member of council to make decisions on behalf of the municipality (Ontario 2014, 5).” Mayors of Canadian cities and large towns are almost invariably expected to do their job on a full-time basis, and many serve for multiple terms, sometimes for decades.⁵ But the term “professional” is rarely used when speaking of such mayors.

Before going further we must attempt to determine what “professional” might mean in this context. It is no doubt a pre-requisite for being a professional that the job in question be full-time. This is precisely why the possibility of full-time status for municipal councillors receives so much attention in this paper. Having some measure of executive authority is probably also a pre-requisite in this context – but, as we have seen, Canadian municipal councillors do not have such authority. Other indicators of professionalism that have been cited (Gu rin and Kerrouche 2008) include lengths of careers in politics and levels of education. In the Canadian context, we have no data on such variables. In any event, as far as education levels are related to professional status, we would expect the education received to be directly related to the requirements of the profession itself. As has been indicated earlier in this paper and in the research of Gr nier and M vellec (2014), examples of “training” programs for municipal councillors are limited at best. Only in Qu bec has there been any effort to make such programs compulsory.

⁴ http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_01m25_e.htm

⁵ For an explanation of how Hazel McCallion managed served as mayor of Mississauga, Ontario (2011 population of 713,000), see Urbaniak

At this point there is a temptation to draw some easy conclusions about the Canadian experience: except in the largest of cities, councillors are not expected to be full-time because (except arguably for mayors) they have no executive responsibilities and levels of remuneration are not commensurate with any conceivable definition of “professional”. The “lay amateur” model appears to reign supreme. But the story is not so simple, and the rest of this paper attempts to explain why.

The first point is that over the past few decades municipal governments have increasingly been perceived as a distinct level of government in Canada rather than as quasi-governments that are more like public corporations. It is true that they retain their corporate form and that they do not have any form of constitutional recognition, but that has not stopped provincial legislatures from approving laws that have significantly enhanced their formal authority and status (Garcea and LeSage 2005 and Sancton and Young 2009). As quasi-governments in the past, municipal councillors were elected for short terms of office (one or two years); not all were elected at the same time; and many electoral districts (wards) elected two or more members. Now, however, terms of office are now invariably for four years; all councillors are elected at the same time; and most wards elect only one member. All these changes have been advanced on the grounds that they make municipalities more like federal and provincial legislatures and therefore more like real levels of government. Provincial laws about conflicts of interest and municipal codes of conduct (Levine 2009) have also served to transfer norms from other levels of government to the municipal level.

In 2013 it was argued by a London citizen (who is now a councillor) that conflicts of interest for municipal councillors “would be almost entirely eliminated (quoted in London 2013, A-20)” if the position were considered to be full time. It is true that conflicts of interest relating to current employment would by definition be eliminated. However, we can hardly expect councillors to sell any property they might own. Nor can we expect them, while in office, not to be thinking about future job prospects. It is not unheard of for councillors to become involved in some aspect of the local property industry after they leave office, because while in office they inevitably acquire a great deal of relevant information. Putting councillors in a position where they must worry about future employment is probably not a good idea. We can “professionalize” the position of councillor, but we cannot guarantee against electoral defeat or a desire to move on to more lucrative private-sector opportunities.

Changes that have made city governments more like the federal and provincial governments have meant that most serious candidates for local office in cities have had to make increasingly extravagant promises, not so much about what kinds of material benefits they will deliver to their wards but more about how they will conduct themselves while in office. Most such promises involve time: more consultation with established neighbourhood groups; faster responses to pleas for help with municipal problems; a strong presence on social media; more mechanisms to provide “citizen engagement”, including involvement in the budgetary process. Meanwhile, especially in municipalities that have been made larger through annexations and amalgamations, agendas for municipal meetings become longer and more complex, thereby requiring more time for preparation. This last imperative is especially demanding in the Canadian non-partisan context where councillors cannot rely on cues from party leadership about how to vote. According to some authoritative interpretations of laws requiring open municipal meetings (Sancton 2015b), municipal councillors cannot even consult with each other informally

before meetings in such a way as to “lay the groundwork to exercise” the power or authority of the council or one of its committees.

These factors set up a peculiar dynamic that has not been sufficiently explored. Conscientious municipal councillors spend more and more time on the job; the most conscientious attend just about any event to which they are invited; they become more knowledgeable about some policy issues than even some of the full-time professional staff. Such councillors do indeed work at least forty hours a week as a councillor. They can even reasonably claim that they are full-time. But what they probably cannot do openly is to argue that their positions should be remunerated in accordance with full-time service, especially if their idea of such remuneration is well above the average employment income in their municipality. By doing so they would appear to fit common stereotypes of elected politicians which see them as mostly concerned with lining their own pockets (even if some might be better off financially by retaining full-time employment *outside* municipal government.)

Some might argue that we are now in a position where we have the worst of two worlds: “lay amateurs”, no matter how accomplished and committed to community service they might be, are unwilling to make the massive time commitments to municipal government that now seem to be required; potential “professionals” might refuse to consider municipal candidacies because the remuneration is too low. While American middle-class suburbs of the type studied by J. Eric Oliver might still attract “lay amateurs” to their municipal councils, the likelihood of the election of such people in Canadian city government has probably long since passed and there is almost certainly no way to reverse the trend, notwithstanding the obvious potential attractiveness of such an option for senior municipal staff who must frequently contend with councillors who want to become closely involved in city administration.⁶

Should we be concerned that municipal voters seem simultaneously to want “professional” council members but are often not willing to remunerate them for their time and commitment? This is a big question. We could only really know the answer if we could somehow find out exactly what types of people are deterred from running for municipal office in Canadian cities because of remuneration levels that are low in comparison to those of senior managers and established professionals. Finding out the motivations of the people who have been elected would be theoretically possible through surveys and interviews, but most would probably respond in the same way as Oliver’s respondents, i.e. they wanted to “serve the public”. Many no doubt receive considerable personal gratification from being at the centre of local decision-making, from receiving appropriate deference from municipal staff, and from being sought after by local media. Even if ultimate success rates are low, there are surely many others who at least contemplate using local office as stepping stone to provincial and federal politics. Once again, such motivations would be difficult to capture in surveys. Do social scientists really expect elected officials to answer surveys conscientiously and honestly, even if it means admitting that they don’t always tell the same story to their electors?

Although recruiting candidates for public office is a problem in some rural areas in Canada, there does not appear to be any shortage in city elections. Sometimes there is concern

⁶ For two recent books that treat this issue from different perspectives, see Valverde 2012 and Siegel 2015. Valverde’s book is about Toronto; Siegel’s about Canada. For an earlier article on the impact of full-time councillors on Canadian municipal administrators, see Sancton and Woolner 1990

about candidate “quality”, but such worries invariably come from those with a nostalgic attachment to the “lay amateur”. In any event, almost everyone acknowledges that the problem, if it exists, could well be made worse by raising salaries and expecting all councillors to give up their regular employment or professional practice. Many cities, including London probably have the remuneration package about right: not so high as to expect full-time commitment but just high enough that councillors and their families receive a significant infusion of extra funds for what is clearly a huge sacrifice of time and effort.⁷

Conclusion

Despite launching in 2014 the most ambitious orientation program that the city of London has ever experienced, increased councillor training or education is not on anyone’s agenda. No one has suggested that it should be mandatory for councillors to take any particular set of courses to assist them in doing their job. Nevertheless, it is no doubt significant that, of London’s eleven newly-elected councillors in 2014, three were relatively recent graduates of Masters of Public Administration (MPA) programs, one from Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario and two from the Local Government Program at the University of Western Ontario (Western) in London. A fourth holds an MA in Political Science from Western; he studied local government as part of his coursework. All four were employed while running for office and have continued with their outside employment after their election. Although Western’s MPA is designed for municipal managers, not councillors, the two MPA graduates from Western both ran unsuccessfully for office prior to starting their MPA studies. They have both stated publicly that they included their MPA on their campaign election material as one factor making them qualified for election; they both believe their MPA was at least a small factor in their success. Despite the absence of any formal requirements for training, there have never been as many councillors with formal education in public administration and local government as there are now.

There are no data available about whether other city councils have experienced similar increases in the election of younger members with these kinds of academic qualifications. Such data should be collected. If they demonstrate that there is indeed a trend toward councillors possessing these kinds of academic qualifications, then we could well be witnessing the beginning of a particular form of professionalization that we have not seen before on Canadian city councils. But it is hard to imagine that for the foreseeable future such “professionally educated councillors” will ever form more than a tiny minority on Canadian city councils. This is as it should be in local democratic representative institutions, where the only qualification for office should be the ability to get elected by one’s fellow citizens. Academic students of political science and public administration, however, are surely entitled to hope that our graduates who win elections will make a positive difference in the quality of our democratic life.

⁷ The annual salary for London city councillors is 33,000 CAD, one-third of which is free of income tax (London 2013, 5).

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