

Foreword

*Gerry Stoker*¹

Urban governance has long been seen as a valuable base for democratic practice that matches the potential of citizen participation with a concern for effective program and service delivery. Good urban governance is rightly conceived in this book as about both the inputs into decision-making and the outputs of that decision-making. It is argued that good governance requires openness to a range of interests but it also demands a capacity to act to improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of a locality. The challenges in meeting the conflicting demands of good governance are successfully conceptualized and explored in this book and the reader is offered in addition some intriguing empirical examples from around the world of localities battling to meet the complex demands of good urban governance. The overall message of the book is realistic - we are offered no panaceas - but it is hopeful and it provides important lessons for both analysts of urban politics and practitioners.

We need the new thinking that this book provides and stimulates because storm clouds are gathering around the practice of urban governance. The first concern is the decline of community politics and rise of single issue focus in politics that makes the cross-functional representative processes of urban government look out of sorts with the thrust of political practice that sees a pluralist mix of participants move from one issue to the next. Related to this development in many jurisdictions, multi-function urban government finds itself surrounded by a series of separate single-purpose agencies that have their own politics and mechanisms of accountability. Through community governance some in and around urban government tried to claim some democratic oversight on this fragmented world but success in terms of the legitimacy and delivery of that claim has been limited.

The second major change in politics that is gathering momentum as generations unfold is the greater role of social media and engagement through social media. Not only is there no obvious geographical location or local identity essential to that type of politics -a particular claim of urban government- the reality is that developments in social media lower barriers to political engagement in a way that makes urban government's claim to that role look weak and out-of-date.

¹ Professor of Governance & Director of the Centre for Citizenship, Globalization and Governance, University of Southampton, and Centenary Research Professor, University of Canberra.

Urban government- too often reflected in the make-up of its activists- is par excellence a democratic opportunity for generations that in a few decades will not be with us. There are new generations doing their politics differently and potentially leaving urban government behind.

Finally urban government has found itself squeezed by the increasing multi-level nature of governance. A city government of the past might have been seen as more or less autonomous but in today's world the delivery of any policy - environmental, social or economic - has an inherent multilevel governance dimension to it. Urban government as the bottom of the governance pile is in constant danger of being squeezed by the pressures to deliver- sometimes in open coordination mode and sometimes in more target-driven mode- the agendas and projects of others. The space to do something different through urban government appears to be smaller and more limited than in the past and so the democratic focus has drifted away from it.

One form of counter blast to these developments has been the emergence of variety of claims to discover a new localism or urbanism. These arguments are founded on a justifiable scepticism of what national or supranational governments can do, combined with the sensible argument that urban government because of its variety can provide a learning context for policy development. But in the end these arguments do little to deliver a clear democratic function to local government. The case for urban government needs to be remade on the basis of its democratic credentials. Can it find a unique role in the pluralist, fast-moving, multi-layered governance of contemporary democracies and societies? This book begins to enable us to see how such a development might be possible.

The Quest for Good Urban Governance

Theoretical Reflections and International Practices

van den Dool, L.; Hendriks, F.; Gianoli, A.; Schaap, L.

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