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BETTER GOVERNMENT THROUGH RESEARCH

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AMALGAMATION: A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEMS IN GREATER MONCTON AND GREATER FREDERICTON?

WANTED: Someone to Prove that Amalgamation is Good

GUIDELINES FOR APPLICANT:

DO:

1. Concentrate on the criterion of efficiency
2. Arbitrarily define the geographic area
3. Use the same report for Fredericton and Moncton

DON'T:

1. Consider solutions other than
 - (a) status quo
 - (b) partial amalgamation
 - (c) total amalgamation
2. Reveal the criteria for decisions
3. Consider the socio-economic characteristics of the area

Urban areas across Canada have been undergoing local government reform as one way of coping with both the pressures and costs of urban development, and the demand for a higher standard of municipal services. The Regional government programme in Ontario, the recommendations of the Le Haye Commission in Quebec, and the recent reorganization of Winnipeg have raised fundamental questions regarding the ability of local government to govern. In attempting to find satisfactory answers, all have touched on the matter of the distribution of authority between the province and the municipalities, and the relative responsiveness and representativeness of local government structures.

In 1967, a major reorganization of local government was undertaken by the provincial government in New Brunswick. The reform that was carried out answered the indirectly posed question of provincial-municipal distribution of authority by re-allocating previously municipal functions to the provincial government.¹

1.

For a discussion of municipal reorganization in New Brunswick see: Ralph R. Krueger "The Provincial-Municipal Government Revolution in New Brunswick", Canadian Public Administration, Vol. XIII, No. 1 (Spring 1970), p. 51-99.

While the reform was based on the desirable notion of minimizing municipal resource inequities, it chose to do so at the expense of a local ability to set priorities in response to local needs. Concern for administrative efficiency overrode a concern for local political responsiveness. The local government reform effected at that time -- amalgamation in the St. John area -- reflected the emphasis on streamlining administrative structures.

Amalgamation as a technique of local government reform fails to deal with the question of provincial-municipal distribution of authority. It assumes that the distribution at the particular point in time is appropriate and merely streamlines the structures that have the authority to perform the various functions of local government. Amalgamation also fails to consider the responsiveness or representativeness of the present structures, since the legitimacy of the present structures in this regard is also assumed. Amalgamation simply deals with the question of the size of the area to be administered.

Although there has been no overall provincial programme to deal with the reorganization of urban municipalities that have mutual boundaries and share problems of development and the provision of services, municipalities in New Brunswick can request amalgamation or annexation proceedings. Both Fredericton and Moncton requested amalgamation feasibility studies. The province appointed H. Carl Goldenberg as Royal Commissioner for both of these areas in January 1970. For the Moncton area, his terms of reference were as follows:

..... to hold an inquiry into and concerning:

- (a) the form, method, manner and efficiency of municipal government and organization now existing in the Greater Moncton Area;
- (b) the feasibility of amalgamation of all or certain units and the form of government and organization thereof;
- (c) the feasibility of alteration of the boundaries of any units of government and organization and the form of government and organization thereof;
- (d) a comparison of present municipal tax burdens in the various units with those resulting from the implementation of any recommendations made;
- (c) community planning; and
- (d) any related matters.

The terms of reference for the Fredericton area were identical, only the name was changed. The final reports² were completed in June 1971.

2.

H. Carl Goldenberg, Report of the Royal Commission on the Greater Fredericton Area, June 15, 1971.

Local Government reform is couched in provincial policy; and therefore, the Goldenberg studies should be viewed in the context of New Brunswick government policies and reforms. There seem to have been three limitations to the stated terms of reference:

- (1) The municipal government reform in 1967, based on the recommendations of the Byrne Commission;
- (2) the Saint John amalgamation;
- (3) the current legislation -- The Municipalities Act.

In 1967, a functional reorganization of local government took place. The province assumed the responsibility for all general services to people, including education, justice and welfare. The municipalities retained the responsibility for all services associated with property, including fire protection, garbage collection, sewerage, water supply, parks and community planning. At the same time, the counties were abolished; the province assumed the task of assessing all real property; and a uniform mechanism for giving municipal grants was established.

Until the functional reorganization was implemented, the province could not deal with the municipalities on a uniform basis because different functions and acts applied to different municipalities. It is unlikely that the province would now want to reorganize the functional responsibilities of just one or two municipalities.

At the same time as the major changes in municipal government were implemented, Saint John and its surrounding municipalities were amalgamated to form a single city. This may have established a precedent for a solution to the problems of development and inter-municipal cooperation, thereby limiting the search for other, perhaps more appropriate solutions for the Moncton and Fredericton areas.

The Municipalities Act may have restricted the interpretation given to the terms of reference. It provides that a municipal council may petition the Minister of Municipal Affairs for the institution of amalgamation proceedings with respect to the amalgamation of two or more municipalities and/or the annexation of a contiguous area. On the recommendations of the Minister, and after the study of a feasibility report, the Lieutenant-Governor in Council may amalgamate two or more municipalities and/or annex a contiguous area to the municipality or decrease the territorial limits of a municipality³. The Act does not suggest any other method for municipal change.

³ H. Carl Goldenberg. Report of the Royal Commission on the Greater Fredericton Area, (June 15, 1971) p.2.

It is interesting to note that the New Brunswick response to amalgamation requests has been to strike royal commissions. Royal commissions, as are all specially-constituted units of inquiry, are based on the principle that critical evaluations of government structures, programmes, or policies are best carried out by non-governmental agents. The assumption is that the special agent is charged with the responsibility of "creative investigation"; if this were not the assumption, the task would presumably be done within the present existing provincial administrative structure. Yet the reports for Fredericton and Moncton do not exhibit any creative investigation of alternatives for local government reorganization. Goldenberg seems to have been restricted to geographic reorganization of the municipalities and seemingly had only one alternative, amalgamation.

The reports themselves provide little indication that there was any effort to do otherwise. Several discussions that one would expect to find in an amalgamation feasibility study are not found in the reports. These include:

- 1.) An evaluation of amalgamation to solve the current problems in the Greater Fredericton and the Greater Moncton areas and a consideration of alternatives.
- 2.) A discussion of the criteria used to define the boundary area for municipal reorganization. Although several criteria that should be used to delineate the boundary in the Fredericton study⁴ are identified, Goldenberg fails to show whether or how he uses them. No criteria are identified in the Moncton study.
- 3.) A projection of the future potential of each area in terms of its infrastructure and economic and human resources.
- 4.) An analysis of the socio-economic character of the people as an indication of the economic viability of a 'new' community.

The use of a royal commission technique under such circumstances is indeed questionable. Amalgamation may, in fact, be the most appropriate type of government reorganization of urban centres in New Brunswick. But, without a careful evaluation of the alternatives, such a conclusion cannot be made.

4. His criteria are: "distance from the City of Fredericton, the centre of the area; population and the pattern of settlement; community identity; economic interdependence; and service requirements and financing." (p.8)