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Building a collaborative advantage: Network governance and homelessness policy-making in Canada
C. Doberstein
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The book focuses on how decisions are made about funding for homelessness programs at the local level in Canada. Its theoretical work focuses on network governance, drawing on concepts of institutionalization and inclusiveness of the network, and on the metagovernance concept for how the state regulates networks, to make a broad argument about what drives policy innovation and coordination. The main argument is that better decisions are made with respect to homelessness funding when municipal officials engage with community stakeholders (such as nonprofit-sector leaders, frontline workers and senior officials from all orders of government). The book further argues that Calgary and Vancouver do a relatively good job of engaging with such stakeholders, Toronto less so.

The book begins with a rather touching preface in which the author explains what brought him to the subject. He was a young undergraduate student from a small community in British Columbia, walking through the streets of Vancouver and witnessing a lot of street homelessness. Wanting to do something about it, he pursued the subject academically and by eventually writing a doctoral dissertation that became the basis for this book.

Vancouver and Calgary both have community advisory bodies that meet regularly where members engage in important debate that leads to decisions pertaining to the disbursement of homelessness funding from the federal and provincial governments. By contrast, Toronto has a community advisory body that advises Toronto’s municipal government on how to direct federal homelessness funding; however, it meets just once or twice a year and “essentially functions as a rubber stamp for the [municipal] bureaucracy’s homelessness agenda” (p. 95). The book goes on to state: “Toronto advanced many important policy debates and changes in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but the city has since lost its position on the cutting edge…” (p. 88).

This book should be read by practitioners, leaders in Canada’s nonprofit sector generally, consultants, professors and graduate students. Ideally, the author should condense the book’s main findings into a journal article—or even better, into an open access policy report for broader dissemination.

One of the book’s strengths is that it does not shy away from criticizing the City of Toronto for doing a suboptimal job of engaging with community stakeholders. Another is that it shines the light on governance at the municipal level, a previously neglected area of study among homelessness scholars. In fact, this book constitutes one of the only analyses of homelessness governance in Canada of which I am aware.

Another strength of this book is that it compares and contrasts homelessness across three major Canadian cities, an exercise that is surprisingly rare among homelessness scholars in Canada. I found the book’s comparison of homelessness trends rather astonishing. Between 2008 and 2014, Calgary saw a 62 per cent decrease in street homelessness, while Toronto saw a 24 per cent increase. Also, as of 2014, families constituted just 5 per cent of persons living in Vancouver’s homeless shelter system; while in Toronto, the figure was 20 per cent. Previously, it had never quite dawned on me just how different homelessness looked on the ground in these cities.

The book has a few shortcomings. The various funding streams for homelessness programs across the country could have been outlined better. In Calgary, for example, funding available for the local homelessness governing network provided by the
provincial government dwarfs federal funding for homelessness by roughly a 4:1 ratio, and in Vancouver, provincial spending on homelessness exceeds federal spending on homelessness by a 20:1 ratio if capital funding is included. These arrangements vary tremendously across municipalities. Moreover, Canada has approximately 3,700 municipal governments, yet only 61 of them directly receive federal funding for homelessness. A general overview of Canada’s homelessness funding framework early in the book would have therefore been helpful.

Notably, the book contains a small number of factual errors (none of which undermine the book’s main arguments). The book states, for example, that it was the Chrétien government that terminated federal spending for new social housing units in Canada (with the exception of on-reserve housing) in 1993. This is a common misconception; it was actually the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney that announced this termination in its April 1993 budget. Also, the author argues that Vancouver’s decision to create a ‘low barrier’ homeless shelter (that is, no requirement of being ‘clean and sober’) was the first of its kind in Canada, when in fact, such shelters existed in Toronto well before this. Finally, I personally could have done without the diagrams in Chapter 6 pertaining to metagovernance, although readers with a particular interest in network governance theory may find them more useful.

In my view, this book was long overdue, and I hope that people read it and reference it often. Professor Doberstein is an up-and-coming scholar who will no doubt make other important contributions to the literature. I hope the motivation for homelessness that he gained coming to the big city keeps him engaged in homelessness scholarship well into the future.

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La Constitution bilingue du Canada, un projet inachevé
Dirigé par Linda Cardinal et François Larocque
Les Presses de l’Université Laval
2017, Québec, 310 pages
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L’article 55 de la Loi constitutionnelle de 1982 exige, de façon impérative, « la préparation et l’adoption de la version française des textes constitutionnels du Canada ‘dans les meilleurs délais’ » (1). Pourquoi est-ce important que le pays ait son document fondateur dans les deux langues officielles, outre l’évidence profondément paradoxale s’il ne l’était pas dans ce pays? Un exemple devrait suffire à le démontrer: la lutte pour les écoles françaises au Canada français minoritaire axée sur l’article 23 de la Charte a abouti au succès retentissant de la décision Mahé c Alberta du 15 mars 1990 en raison de la version française, en partie, qui déclare qu’un droit de gestion existe grâce au vocable « établissements d’enseignement de la minorité linguistique » qui élargit le droit restrictive de la version anglaise, « minority language educational facilities ». Quand les deux langues officielles ont la « même force de loi », Mahé c Alberta exprime éloquemment l’importance de la version française, pour ne rien dire du capital réel et symbolique qui en découle pour les minorités officielles.

Il est à rappeler que les lois ont été traduites — elles l’étaient dès 1990 — , mais la disposition qui impose qu’elles soient adoptées pour avoir force de loi — « conformément à la procédure de modification » habituelle (formule 7/50) — par les deux chambres du Parlement canadien et les législatures provinciales n’a pas été respectées en raison des nombreuses conjonctures référées ci-dessous entre autres,