

NEWS AND REVIEWS

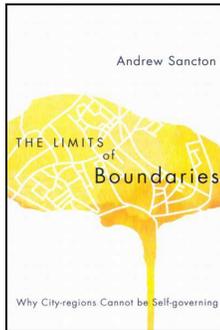
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BOOK REVIEW: The limits of boundaries. Why city-regions cannot be self-governing

Andrew Sancton (McGill-Queen's University Press. 2008)

If it really matters how a metropolitan region is governed, should it not be obvious on the ground? To take just three New-World examples of metropolitan-scale city councils, Calgary, Houston and Brisbane should have a different 'look and feel' to that of their fragmented equivalents, not to mention greater efficiency and equity stemming from their ability to manage growth across all or most of the urban region.

Of course they *do* look different, despite the universality of Western urban development overwhelming the good intentions of policy makers who might plan for prosperity, sustainability and/or a sense of place. The apparent differences seem to arise more from the endowments of nature, accidents of history and expressions of local politics and cultures than from the capacity of these city governments to comprehensively plan, coordinate and integrate growth and change across their metropolitan regions.

These facts of life do not diminish the importance of the arguments for metropolitan government, and nor should they. The effectiveness of the management of metropolitan

regions matters, more than ever, for many well-rehearsed reasons. It is accepted that such effectiveness is influenced by patterns of jurisdictional boundaries, and that jurisdictional boundaries can seriously impede desirable policy making – for instance when a city’s suburban growth occurs just beyond its boundaries; when the distribution of the population, and the location of shopping centres and other major destinations in a metropolitan region, are determined by the exercise of local powers irrespective of (or in opposition to) natural resources, trade areas and transport services; when competing transport agencies refuse to work to regional objectives; when responsibilities for watersheds and catchments are randomly divided; or when revenues and responsibilities are vertically and spatially distorted.

It is therefore important that the case for metropolitan government be made strongly, for these issues need to be addressed. There are any number of alternative models for managing metropolitan regions, with all of them represented somewhere in the world, as if evolutionary forces apply to the differentiation and speciation of urban governments, generating experiments and trials. Apparently all of these models work, in the sense that metropolitan regions seem to grow and prosper regardless – governments at all levels continue to cobble together policies and carry out functions sufficiently well for cities to flourish to some degree. Equally, these models are defective, destructive and inequitable to greater or lesser degrees, and the arguments in favour of metropolitan government help define the problems and the possible responses.

The author of *The Limits of Boundaries*, Andrew Sancton, has been actively engaged in these issues for decades. He is the Director of the Local Government Program in the Department of Political Science at the University of **Western Ontario in London, Ontario**. He is the author or editor of *Merger mania: the assault on local government* (2000), *Metropolitan governance revisited* (1998), *Governing Canada's city regions: adapting form to function* (1994), and of other articles, book chapters and reports with titles such as ‘Why municipal amalgamations? Halifax, Toronto, Montreal’, ‘Drawing lines: defining the roles of municipal, federal, and provincial governments in addressing urban social issues in Canada’, ‘The governance of metropolitan areas in Canada’, ‘Signs of life? The transformation of two-tier metropolitan government’, ‘Canadian cities and the new regionalism’ and ‘Jane Jacobs on the organization of municipal government’.

It is Sancton's aim, in this lively contribution, to bring some reality to various aspects of the debate. Clearly he has become increasingly impatient with the unreality of specific 'solutions' to the question of how metropolitan regions should be governed. In short, metropolitan regions, or 'city-regions' in the discourse to which this book belongs, cannot be self governing: those that are self governing are the exceptions that prove the rule. The reasoning is given in its most succinct form in the final sentence.

"Because we cannot draw stable multi-purpose boundaries for city-regions, we are incapable of designing the institutions that are needed for city-regions to be self-governing" (p. 137)

While the problem addressed by the book is 'how to structure our institutions for the effective governance of our city-regions', (xii) its focus is on whether boundaries can be drawn for those institutions.

"I argue in this book that, contrary to some recent claims, cities in Western liberal democracies will not and cannot be self-governing. Self-government requires that there be a territory delimited by official boundaries. For cities, the boundaries will never be static, will never be acceptable to all, and will always be contested. Boundaries fatally limit the capacity of cities to be self-governing" (p. 3)

This proposition is then put in an even more forceful manner.

"(T)he argument advanced here is that genuinely multi-functional governments are no longer feasible – if they ever were – especially for the world's largest and most important city-regions. The object of this book, therefore, is to demonstrate that city-regions cannot be established as self-governing entities in any one of these senses: as sovereign states, as units of federations, or even as multi-functional metropolitan governments. Not surprisingly, there are some exceptions to such a sweeping statement. As usual, the exceptions will help us understand the general rule" (pp. 5-6)

The book is an extended essay which engages directly with the politics of governing the wider metropolitan region of Toronto, where city politics has always been lively and where policy making structures have been significantly reconstructed a number of times. The Toronto debates and related academic arguments for devolution are inherently interesting for those concerned with cities, although they might have been more so if the maps were less compressed and included more of the many place names mentioned in the text.

The treatment of *The Limits Of Boundaries* is comprehensive: the absorption of city-states into nation states, the historical origins and durability of the boundaries of nation

states and of states within federations, the complexities of boundaries within metropolitan regions, and the instability of the latter. In short, this is a concise, entertaining and valuable contribution to a pressing set of issues.

Accordingly, the author would probably be pleased that the book provokes this reader to an immediate counterpoint. Since communities in complex layers of localities, regions and nations must muddle through without access to perfect (or even good) information, governance structures and policy-making processes, it is unrealistic to set a much higher test for the functional rationality and durability of the boundaries of putative metropolitan governments than for other jurisdictions. A highly diverse array of governance structures exist throughout the urban world – including for water, drainage, schools, police, business districts, major projects and numerous other functions as well as for municipal and regional governments – the boundaries of which are likely to have been the result of expedients, compromises and deals, and are likely to have been overtaken by events, but are not so perverse that those functions cannot be performed. In other words, Sancton's objection to metropolitan governments on the grounds, quoted above, that the boundaries of cities (metropolitan regions) 'will never be static, will never be acceptable to all, and will always be contested', could equally be applied to many existing mechanisms for planning and providing urban services.

This narrow focus on the prospects for stand-alone metropolitan governments leads to two other reservations about Sancton's argument. In the first place, there are too many varieties of metropolitan governance to regard good existing 'multi-functional metropolitan governments' as merely 'exceptions that prove the rule': on various dimensions of, say, scale, scope, power and autonomy, the governance of metropolitan regions forms continuums from little to large, from dysfunctional to highly effective. In the second place, the issues concerning the creation of new institutions and their boundaries are subordinate to the larger question of finding mechanisms and processes to manage metropolitan regions as integrated entities, at least to a greater degree, in more places, than at present.

If we are to focus our research, policy making and advocacy on this more fundamental question, then Sancton should be heeded: arguments for self-government, or for cities being promoted from local government to state/provincial government, are not only likely to fail but also to distract from practical reforms which might deliver better

metropolitan planning and management. Even more is this true when it comes to plotting the boundaries that are needed for powerful new institutions operating in complex, overlapping urban regions. I would add that new institutions tend to rearrange rather than eliminate problems of competing and conflicting jurisdictions and the need for other structures for coordination.

Although Sancton says little about how, as opposed to how not, 'to structure our institutions for the effective governance of our city-regions', a clear direction is provided in his incidental account of some of the moves of the government of Ontario in defining a green belt and requiring higher densities in the growth areas around (greater) Toronto. In a word (mine), improving the planning and management of metropolitan regions is a task for the next higher level of government. Even in the case of metropolitan-scale city councils such as Calgary, Houston and Brisbane, only the state governments of Alberta, Texas and Queensland can be, in effect, the upper tier regional government.

This proposition is obvious to Australian observers of these issues, since the governments of the states of New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia each govern a single dominant metropolis and its region, which is the entire state. In Queensland and Tasmania the capital cities are only marginally less dominant. Brisbane is an interesting case: the only success of the greater city movements in Australia, it was formed through the amalgamation of the twenty municipalities in the Brisbane metropolitan region as it was in 1924. It has not expanded with growth, and now has a population of one million, in a metropolitan region of 1.8 million, in a continuous urban area (South East Queensland) of 2.8 million, in a vast state with a population of only 4.3 million. For the past two decades, the state government has been active as the regional strategic planner and manager of South East Queensland (Queensland 2008).

The extreme example of this type is Western Australia, a state of 2.5 million square kilometres where three quarters of the total population of 2.2 million live in the greater metropolitan area of Perth. Since settlement in 1829, notwithstanding the establishment of municipalities (over thirty of them in the Perth region), only the colonial and later state governments governed Perth, performing all urban functions other than local property services. For the past sixty years, the form of metropolitan region governance has included, with the bipartisan support of state governments of different political

persuasions, a statutory region planning scheme funded through a hypothecated property tax and administered by an independent, expert planning commission (Dawkins 2009). The architect of this approach, Gordon Stephenson, was at that time the foundation professor of town and regional planning at the University of Toronto (1955-1960); his boundaries for the Perth region were so expansive that they can still accommodate twice the current population.

In the many countries and states with dominant cities, central governments can only establish metropolitan governments by devolving the greater part of their powers, functions and resources to the new entity. Their refusal to do so is not only a question of realpolitik, and not only in response to the many impediments discussed by Sancton. It also derives from good and practical policy. The logic is compelling that, as Sancton suggests, “the central government [should] look after planning for long-range infrastructural development” (p. 110). Reforms are more achievable, and probably more effective, if, as Sancton suggests, we do not attempt to redesign the ways in which city-regions are governed but rather “make better use of the wide array of institutions that we already have” (p. 134). Notwithstanding Sancton’s argument, in other countries those reforms might include strengthening and creating ‘self-governing’ ‘multi-functional governments’ for metropolitan regions.

The matter goes very much further than this. There are many impediments to effective metropolitan planning and management – constitutional, political, structural, institutional, professional – beyond the powers of most cities to influence. Too many central governments (of countries and of states in a federation) have failed to address the urgent problems of the sustainability of cities, have not responded to the imperatives of climate change in relation to cities, or have simply failed in their efforts to assist metropolitan regions to reconfigure as they get much larger. In investigating or making policy for these issues, *The limits of boundaries* offers us wise historical perspectives on city government and can help us avoid false panaceas – and unproductive arguments about boundaries.

References

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