

Revisiting Municipal Reforms in Quebec and the New Responsibilities of Local Actors in a Globalising World

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Over the last fifteen years, Canada's city-regions, like other city-regions in the world, have been facing several changes that can be associated in many ways with globalisation. That brought to the fore a series of questions about the role of territory or space, the availability of resources for municipalities to cope with new responsibilities, the capacity of local power to adapt to external pressures, and the forms of cooperation that municipalities should establish at a metropolitan scale with economic actors, other local institutions and upper tiers of government. These issues have been explored at length in the recent literature on urban governance and new forms of regionalism (Friskén and Norris, 2001; Swanstrom, 2001).

In Quebec, such questions have not been on the top of the research agenda for social scientists. This does not mean that local political actors and the Quebec government were inactive in that field. It is in fact the other way around. Up to now, politicians, technocratic civil servants and a small network of experts have led the debates about the restructuring of local and municipal politics.

Without trying to explain why social scientists paid so little attention to the restructuring of local power in Quebec, our intention here is to relate the recent municipal and metropolis reform that took place at the turn of the new millennium in referring to contextual changes. However, although these changes help to understand why the institutional and governance framework has to be conformed

to the new urban reality, this does not explain the political choices that were made by the Quebec government aiming at modernising the municipal and metropolitan systems. This requires paying attention to the normative and political dimensions of those choices, i.e. to look at values, opportunities and institutional constraints. This represents the particular angle that shapes our discussion of those reforms. In this paper, we aim at shedding light on some of the limits deriving from the political choices that were made by the Quebec government. In doing so, we will draw out an ambiguity inherent in their strategy, especially the approach elaborated in the case of Montréal.

Our paper is divided into three parts. Firstly, we will recall the historical context of Quebec municipal reforms since the Quiet Revolution. In some ways, the recent strategy has a lot in common with previous attempts. Secondly, we will present an overview of the recent wave of municipal reforms. We will look at more closely to the political and institutional changes in Montreal. Finally, we will suggest an analysis of these reforms by insisting on some of their limits.

1. The historical context of Quebec municipal reforms (1960 to mid-1990s)

The Quiet Revolution put at the forefront of the governmental agenda the issue of reforming municipal structures. The election of the Liberal Party in 1960, under the leadership of Jean Lesage, marked the end of the long Duplessist era, which was, according to the leaders of the Quiet Revolution, a period of great backwardness (“Grande noirceur”). This election was legitimised as the beginning of a new period in Quebec history, signifying the entrance of Quebec into modernity. In this context, the modernisation of municipal politics was seen as a prerequisite that would clearly reflect the crossing of this historical step. From the 1960s to the 1990s, several parliamentary commissions, study groups, reports, projects and bills sought to transform and rejuvenate municipal institutions in conformity with the diagnostic that had been posed during the first years of the Quiet Revolution. However, through those decades, these projects

did not bring in efficient and definitive answers. Despite the transformation of the municipal world over the years, the project of deeply reforming the political values and structures of municipalities has remained on the political agenda. In this section, we will make an overview of those various attempts of reforming the municipal level. We will also discuss the opposition from the municipal representatives, notably those from the rural and exurban areas, which impose a halt to several projects and confronted the Quebec governments with the necessity of taking their grievances into account.

1.1 In the aftermath of the Quiet Revolution

The electoral defeat of the “Union nationale” in 1960 marked the end of the “Duplessism” that had impregnated Quebec politics during the previous two decades. This defeat brought about the replacement of the predominant political discourse on Quebec society centred on the protection of its rural, catholic, French-speaking, and conservative dimensions (Meynaud and Léveillé 1973; Bissonnette 1982, Bourque and Duchastel 1996) was based on the political and, even symbiotic, alliance between the Duplessis’ government and the rural sector that had been set up through the years. This representation of Quebec society contributed to give to the rural municipality a symbolic and political importance. However, this discourse served to mask the gap existing between the Quebec polity and the socioeconomy of Quebec society (Simard 1979; Dickinson and Young 1995). In contrast to Duplessist discourse, Quebec society was already urbanised and industrialised after the Second World War. The political weight given to rural municipalities and of councils of county (“conseils de comté”) by the Duplessist government constituted a wrong illusion.¹

¹ In 1960, the number of rural municipalities or, in legal terms, the municipalities of counties, was estimated to be around 1 300, representing 20% of the Quebec population. A council represented each municipality within the county, which also constituted at that time an electoral circumscription. It was composed of all of the mayors and one prefect. In 1944, the Union of councils of county was established. This association was a close and strong allied of the Duplessis government.

Moreover, some significant changes occurred during the 1950s that were the prelude to the future changes set up by the leaders of the Quiet Revolution. During this period, the interventions of the Quebec government became more important and substantial, notably in the sectors of social services and education. It was confronted with the demands from the clergy and the municipalities claiming an increase in the funding for supporting them. The growth of urban population raised new demands for services that the municipalities were unable to deliver, due to their insufficiency of their fiscal resources and the inadaptability of their structures (Meynaud and Léveillé 1973). The broadening of Quebec state interventions reflected also a redefinition of the federal/provincial relations resulting from the will of the Quebec government to expand its spheres of jurisdiction (Hamel and Jalbert 1991; Rocher and Salée 1992). This political orientation became predominant during the Quiet Revolution.

The election of Jean Lesage opened the door to a major restructuring of Quebec politics in a very short period of time. The political changes introduced by the Liberal government occurred at three different levels. First, the political discourse that became predominant emphasised from that moment the urban and industrial character of Quebec society. All of the elements that could be associated with the rural or the pre-industrial dimension of Quebec society came to be rejected and associated with an outdated order. This discourse insisted on the backwardness of Quebec society in comparison to the other provinces and countries, especially Ontario. Several issues were raised for legitimating a major shift in Quebec politics: the inability of state institutions to cope with social and economic demands; the lack of control over the economy and, more particularly, the predominance of foreign capital in key sectors; and the need to transform current political practices (bribery, corruption) and to democratise political life. According to the tenets of this new discourse, the solution to Quebec problems passed through the acceleration of the process of its development in order to make it into a modern society. For the new government, this required to transform political mentalities and institutions based on the principle of rationality. The best and

unique way to achieve the rationalisation of Quebec was to plan all aspects of its social, political and economic development. The planning of state management and, more particularly, the elaboration of specific plans for all of the sectors of activities became the key element of this new discourse (Simard 1979).

Secondly, this discourse on the need of the Quebec society to “catch up” its neighbours revealed a significant change in social relations that had occurred during the 1950s. Three different groups who became allied through their opposition to the Duplessist regime carried it out: the labour unions, the small French-speaking bourgeoisie, and a group of intellectuals and of young educated people having studied abroad. They called into question the role of the old elites (clergy, rural leaders) and the representations of Quebec society associated with them. For those groups, the existing political structures contributed to exclude them while constituting obstacles to the achievement of their political and economic interests. The recourse to the provincial state came to be seen as the best solution to modernise Quebec society on a rational basis and, at the same time, to overcome the obstacles faced by them. The election of the Liberal party provided for them the opportunity of being empowered.

The third level of changes introduced by the Quiet Revolution was the broadening of the field of state interventions. The Quebec government became legitimised as the key actor that would allow to catching up the other modern societies. This brought in a major restructuring of the field of state interventions, which went from the complete replacement of the clergy in the education, social services, and health sectors to the setting up of new state agencies for orchestrating the Quebec economic development. This remodelling of Quebec government passed also by a redefinition of the existing departments to which were attributed new names and missions. One of the most famous symbols of that period was the second nationalisation of hydroelectricity in 1962, contributing to give an extraordinary political, economic, and symbolic weight to Hydro-Québec.

Another important change that occurred during that period and that largely shaped the Quiet Revolution was the redefinition of the Quebec nationalist movement. The predominance of French-Canadian nationalism was called into question by the emergence of the Québécois nationalism. This brought in a redefinition of the representations of the Quebec nation and the adoption of new claims and strategies of mobilisation (Dion 1973, Balthazar 1992; Keating 1997). The Quebec nationalist movement emphasised the territorial, modern, French-speaking, and secular dimensions of the nation. The Quebec territory came to represent its homeland. Another change was the predominance of the sovereigntist discourse, resulting in the marginalizing of the survivance discourse. The accession to Quebec political independence became the main goal of the nationalist movement. This had two consequences. First, it increased the legitimacy of the Quebec state while helping to give a nationalist dimension to governmental decisions. Secondly, this contributed to broaden the constitutional and political disputes with the federal government. A competition was engaged with the federal government, leading the Quebec government to often establish its own agencies and bodies in different spheres of activities without respecting necessarily its jurisdictions (Balthazar 1992; Salée et Rocher 1992).

1.2 The interventions at the municipal level

The municipal level was not left aside in that whole process of restructuring brought in by the Quiet Revolution. The necessity of reforming the municipal structures was raised as one major issue insofar as they were perceived as outdated and inefficient (Meynaud and Léveillé 1973; Bissonnette 1982; Hamel 2001). The political and legal association between the municipality and the parish was called into question in regard to the requirement of an urban and industrial society. The close links between the rural elite and the Duplessist government contributed to raise suspicion towards the municipalities. They were easily seen as opposed to the new and modern rationality advocated by the Liberal

government. This perception was also reinforced by the growing discussions of specific problems faced by municipalities. They referred notably to the fiscal difficulties faced by the municipalities, especially the rural ones. While having to answer to new demands for financing schooling and health services and, consequently, to an increase of their spending, the rural municipalities were confronted to a demographic decline, and then, with a diminution of their sources of revenues. This inadequacy of their revenues was also noticeable with respect to the support for the establishment of industries. In that context, the municipalities were increasingly dependent on governmental transfers and grants (Hamel and Jalbert 1991: 176-80).

Pierre Laporte, minister of the Department of municipal affairs under the Lesage government, became a strong advocate for municipal reforms (Meynaud and Léveillé 1973; Bissonnette 1982). In 1963-64, he established three commissions of inquiry: the Bélanger Commission on municipal fiscal issues; the La Haye Commission in charge of examining the urban question; and the Blier and Sylvestre Commission on the intermunicipal problems in Montréal region. The minister Laporte undertook a provincial tour during which he discussed the project of municipal amalgamation, aiming at reducing the number of rural municipalities. That reform would re-establish a better equilibrium between rural and urban municipalities while allowing at achieving a better rational management of Quebec territory.

The particular attention paid to the reorganisation of the municipal level also followed from the political importance given to the issue of regional development during the Quiet Revolution. Regional development came to be seen as a privileged arena where the logic of modernisation and rationalisation could be applied successfully. This strategic interest followed from the symbolic and political value granted to the territory (Courville 2001). Soon after its election, the Lesage government established three major agencies that aimed at planning every economic and social dimensions of Quebec development by the

government: the Conseil d'orientation économique (C.O.E.Q.); the Bureau d'aménagement de l'Est du Québec (B.A.E.Q.), and the Commission provinciale d'urbanisme (C.P.U.). They aimed at elaborating development planning not only at the Quebec level, but also at the regional and local levels. Over the two following decades, these agencies had a great influence over the policies elaborated by the Quebec government.² The municipalities were “naturally” included within this central development scheme carried out by a new generation of civil servants that were influenced by a technocratic perspective (Simard 1979). An important step in that process of remapping of Quebec territory occurred in 1966 when the Department of the Industry and Commerce proposed a new division of the Quebec territory into 10 administrative regions. Within every region, the emphasis was placed on cities or urban agglomerations, which were presented as poles of development; reference was made to the need of identifying regional and sub-regional poles from which the planning of development should be elaborated. This conception was strengthened with the release of the report of the La Haye Commission in 1968. This new map replaced the existing regional division that was based on historical and cultural factors, helping to strengthening a sense of belonging among the inhabitants.

1.3 The beginning of a long process of reforms

The provincial tour of Pierre Laporte in 1964 was the beginning of a long process of attempts of reforming the municipal sector. Over the three following decades, various bills, reports from study groups and parliamentary commissions, and propositions from organisations representing municipalities were released and debated. Of course, these discussions did not follow a direct trajectory. Two important phases can be drawn out (Bissonnette 1982; Divay and Léveillé 1981). From the 1960s to the mid-1970s or, more precisely, after the oil crisis,

² Although each of those agencies had a specific mandate, they were nonetheless complementary. They were also related to the Office de la planification et du développement (O.P.D.Q.), which had been set up for orchestrating the social and economic development of Quebec. This agency was initially linked to the council of ministers and not a specific department.

the discussions about municipal reforms were framed by the tenets of the discourse on regional development diffused by the leaders of the Quiet Revolution. They were part of the whole project of imposing a rational and centralised management of the Quebec territory responding to the imperatives of a modern, urban and industrial society. The projects followed a top-down approach where the municipal representatives were seen as potential obstacles whose mentalities needed to be transformed. From the oil crisis and the subsequent economic difficulties faced by the Quebec government, the discussions began to be less ambitious and no longer thought as a great leap. The idea of planning at all political scales was gradually left aside and replaced by a management aiming at further integrating the existing municipal actors and structures. The idea of decentralisation started to be presented as one key-legitimising factor for justifying municipal reforms.

During its provincial tour, Pierre Laporte insisted on the necessity of merging municipalities in order to reduce their number. He also emphasised the importance of inter-municipal cooperation. This would allow to overcome the rural isolationism and the fragmentation of Quebec territory into small units that could no longer cope with the requirements of a modern society. This would allow providing better, more diversified services (economic, social and cultural), and cheaper services for citizens. This would also help municipalities to attract more easily businesses and to adopt rules with respect to urban planning. The Liberal government adopted Act 13 in 1965 on the voluntary merger of municipalities. However, the adoption did not result in a great movement of merging. Since the municipal representatives were recognised as the initiators without facing any incentives and constraints, the amalgamation of municipalities occurred from that moment very slowly. The other major reform advocated by Pierre Laporte was the replacement of the existing councils of county by more modern regional organisations representing simultaneously urban and rural municipalities. A proposition was publicly released in 1966 aiming at creating 40 regional county councils that would constitute more reliable and cooperative intermediary

structure for the government. Those regional municipalities would be integrated within the new territorial division adopted at that moment. They would have constituted the regional and sub-regional centres that could foster the economic development of Quebec.

However, the 1966 proposition was left aside with the electoral defeat of the Liberal party. The rising opposition from the Union des conseils de comté (UCC) also contributed to influence the decision of the new elected government. It should be mentioned that the other organisation representing the urban municipalities, the Union of Municipalities of Québec (UMQ) supported the projects of reforms submitted by the minister Laporte. It was only in 1969 that other projects of reform were introduced³. One important reform was the creation of three supramunicipal communities in 1969: the Communauté urbaine de Montréal (CUM), the Communauté urbaine de Québec (CUQ), and the Communauté urbaine de de l'Outaouais (CUO). These new organisations aimed at providing more efficient and, in some cases, new services, opening the door to decentralisation (Meynaud and Léveillé, 1973).

This momentum was somewhat modified with the election of the Liberal party under the leadership of Robert Bourassa in 1970.⁴ Despite the persistence of a technocratic approach on municipal reforms, new elements were introduced in the debates: the notion of profitable federalism (fédéralisme rentable) opening the door to a greater collaboration with the federal government⁵; the

³The release in 1968 of the report from the La Haye Commission on urbanism also contributed to reactivate the discussions about the need of municipal reforms. While reinforcing the necessity of planning the urban development, the report also insisted on the idea of recognising some centres for stimulating and at the same time, orientating the regional development. The report recommended the adoption of regional, inter-local, and local plans. Cf. Bissonnette 1982.

⁴ It should be mentioned that the Union nationale government released some weeks before the election the program Remur. Following from the creation of the three regional urban communities, this plan proposed the creation of 20 additional regional municipalities in the peripheral regions (4 urban communities and 16 regional communities) within the limits of the existing administrative regions. The emphasis was put on the necessity of creating viable communities with some administrative autonomy.

⁵ This recognition of the participation of the federal government in regional development followed from the signature of an accord Quebec-Canada in 1968 with the newly created Federal

predominance of the situation of Montréal with regard to the discussions about local problems; and the growing emphasis on decentralisation as an objective of the reforms. During the first year, the new government showed a strong determination for pursuing the reform of the municipal structures. While setting up a commission on the revision of the municipal code, the minister of Municipal Affairs released a White Paper on municipal reform. The diagnostic posed on municipal problems was not very different from the one discussed under the Lesage government. The amalgamation of municipalities as well as the need of redefining the existing structures in order to create larger, viable, and autonomous institutions capable of administrating former provincial programs was invoked. It proposed, among other things, the creation of 131 broader regional municipalities that were called “sectors of municipal planning” disposing of specific competencies. Many questions regarding the implementation of that reform, such as the establishment of a calendar, were however unanswered in the document that was finally not adopted (Maynaud and Léveillé 1973).

An important change in the discussions on municipal reforms became noticeable after the oil crisis. A moratorium on municipal amalgamation was adopted in 1973. The scope of the reforms, especially the level of transfer of competencies, began to be more limited. The economic and political difficulties faced by the Liberal government at that time could also explain the restriction on its ambitions. The most significant change that occurred during that period was the transformation of the relations with the municipal representatives. An emphasis was gradually put on the need of recognising the existing municipal structures while maintaining some continuity.⁶ It was no longer presumed that the municipal

Department of the regional economic expansion. This agreement recognised the involvement of the federal government with regard to regional development, calling into question the claim for exclusive competency on that matter by the Lesage government. This new orientation by the Bourassa government was influenced by the Higgins-Raynauld-Martin report on the future orientations in matter of regional economic development that should be adopted by the federal government for the province of Quebec. This report emphasised the economic importance of Montréal as a pole of development. Cf. Bernier 1992

⁶ This shift was particularly obvious in the report of the study group on urbanisation conducted by Claude Castonguay. The report insisted on the need of preserving some continuity with the existing institutions. However, despite the insistence on continuity and the existing institutions, the

representatives constitute a priori some adversary. This became noticeable in the governmental discourse on decentralisation.

This shift in the governmental will was observable when the Parti québécois government adopted Bill 125 in 1979 aiming at the creation of Regional County Municipalities (Municipalités régionales de comté or MRCs). For the first time, this reform was successfully implemented. Although this institutional structure involved a centralised control over the activities of municipalities, the Lévesque government legitimised this reform by using a discourse on the decentralisation of responsibilities and on the democratisation of regional politics. Some of the objectives discussed during the Quiet Revolution came to be achieved. Indeed, the creation of 94 MRCs covering the Quebec territory, excluding the territory covered by three supramunicipal communities, led to the demise of the county councils while involving the establishment of a new institutional structure for the management of new responsibilities. The government aimed at establishing its own authorised representative. Bill 125 defined a series of regulations regarding urban and regional planning under the responsibility of the MRCs. The latter became involved in the provision of services such as property evaluation and waste management. In addition, Bill 125 introduced a tax reform aiming at achieving local fiscal autonomy and, at the same time, to reduce governmental transfers to municipalities. However, over the years, the MRCs did not become a key regional actor as the government initially planned it.

1.4 The transformation of the socio-political context of municipal reforms

The opposition faced by the government has also shaped the changes in the successive projects of municipal reforms. One key actor in this regard has been the Union des conseils de comté (UCC) whose mobilisation became more structured and visible from the mid-1960s (Bissonnette 1982; Meynaud and Léveillé 1973). Its opposition did not just consist in rejecting all projects of

report emphasised the need of adopting central and modern policies.

reform. The UCC had been caught off its guard at the beginning by the criticisms and the discussions of reform by the government. In order to be part of the debates, the UCC came to accept the idea of reforming the municipal structures. However, it nonetheless sought to shape the terms of the debates, notably through the publication of its own studies, the participation in governmental conferences and parliamentary commissions. The UCC became a strong supporter of the regional decentralisation of governmental services.

The opposition from UCC came to be strengthened by the growing opposition faced by the governments regarding its regional development policies at the end of the 1960s, especially the missions of planning launched by the B.A.E.Q. The initiatives undertaken by the government, including the closing of some villages brought about strong and voiceful popular opposition⁷. This led to important regional mobilisation that sometimes resulted in the setting up of initiatives aiming at thwart the governmental projects such as Opérations Dignité and the JAL (Simard 1979; Gagnon 1982). The technocratic perspective tending to exclude local populations from the elaboration of the projects was clearly rejected. That mobilisation at the local and regional levels revealed that the government misread the importance of the sense of belonging among the local communities. The governmental reforms ignored that the localities and regions constitute spaces of identity through which the inhabitants distinguish themselves from the others. In other words, the municipalities and regions were not only made of outdated mentalities and institutions.

As previously mentioned, the preliminary discussions around Bill 125 revealed nonetheless a change in the governmental attitude⁸. They showed the

⁷ The mobilisation against the government projects gave rise to an anti-state discourse. The civil servants that met with the regional population were accused of ignoring the regional reality without taking into account the interests of the population. The anti-state discourse was also carried out by the labour unions that triggered at the beginning of the 1970s important and lasting strikes. They broke up the informal alliance that had been formed through the opposition to Duplessist regime (Bissonnette 1982).

⁸The change in the governmental attitude did not only result from the economic difficulties faced by the government. It became confronted with constraints imposed by the Canadian and US

governmental will of further integrating local and regional decision-makers into the process of reforms. This came to be seen as a prerequisite to a successful implementation of reforms. In the meantime, significant changes had occurred in regional and local politics. The struggles of resistance at the local and regional levels helped to democratise these political spaces that could no longer simply be seen as the persistence of the rural conservatism of the Duplessist era. Other representations of those spaces highlighting their cultural and social dimensions became discussed in the debates. Of course, the political and institutional changes introduced by the Quebec government, such as the Regional Development Councils (“Conseils régionaux de développement”) and the bills regarding territorial development and the protection of agricultural lands, transformed the local and regional institutions and structures. Even if their scope was more limited than the great reforms urged by the governments, they had nonetheless a significant impact. However, the reversal in the governmental position did not mean that the local and regional representatives became the instigators in the elaboration of policies regarding regional development and municipalities. Until today, the centralising and top-down approach remained predominant within the Department of Municipal Affairs.

The democratisation of local and regional spaces has also resulted from a mobilisation of new actors that became involved in municipal politics. This occurred out of the traditional channels of political participation. One significant actor has been the citizen committees that emerged in various Quebec municipalities and towns from the end of the 1960s. While searching to broaden political participation within municipal structures, they also called into question the role of the traditional municipal elites. The citizen committee confronted the municipalities with the necessity of providing more diversified services while

economic relations. The room of manoeuvre of the Quebec government appeared to be much more limited. That governmental orientation was also linked to ideological changes in Quebec politics. With election of the Bourassa government, the ideology of planning was called into question and was incrementally replaced by a neo-liberal perspective. This appeared through the redefinition of the O.P.D.Q.’s mandate that came to be more and more limited, leading to its eventual dismantling.

increasing their accessibility. We can mention here the demands for housing and cultural equipment, or the establishment of procedures for public consultation. The democratisation of local politics from below has also resulted from the mobilisation of community/grassroots and environmentalist groups. One significant impact has been the widening of the local political agenda, notably through their contestation of the governmental policies and regulations. They have contributed to politicise new issues (social justice, protection of the environment, women's rights, creation of parks, etc.) that were not previously seen as of local interests. Their mobilisation has been particularly significant in the debates on urban planning and local development. These struggles for the democratisation of local politics led some groups to form new municipal political parties in Québec City and Montréal. Both political parties proposed at the beginning a progressist and critical political program, introducing leftist debates within municipal politics. Of course, over the years, their programs have been largely redefined in a direction that is far from the initial objectives of their founders.

2. The recent wave of municipal reforms in Quebec (mid-1990s)

2.1 A new context for municipal politics

From the mid-1990s, the Quebec government began to discuss more seriously the launching of a process of municipal reform. However, since the adoption of Bill 125 in 1980, the political situation has quite changed. The current political and economic context is different from the context of the Quiet Revolution, except for the constitutional disputes about the respect of jurisdictions between the Quebec government and the federal government. One important change is the hegemony of the neo-liberal discourse on state in Quebec and Canadian politics, including the credo on deregulation, privatisation and reduction of public spending. This did not mean that the role of government became less important in Quebec politics. It did not yet follow the trajectory of Ontario or British

Columbia. However, the government does no longer present itself as the determining driving force orientating the society towards the achievement of collective goals. The discourse on planning has been replaced by the discourse on the establishment of partnerships with the private sector and on the need to provide efficient, cheap and competitive services to the clients. The socio-economic summits organised by the Bouchard government in 1996, which were attended by representatives of the business sector, labour unions, youth organisations, women movement etc., reflected this representation of the state as a creator of synergy and a facilitator. This perspective also shapes the policy adopted by the Quebec government on regional development in which the latter is primarily defined as a support of regional initiatives (Gouvernement du Québec 1997).

In that context, the discourse on decentralisation took on a further importance. While allowing the state to retreat itself from some spheres of activities, the decentralisation of services opens the door to a restructuring of services along the lines of efficiency and proximity. This was the case with the 1992 reform of the health sector involving the transfer of some health services to new regional health boards (Michaud 2000). More recently, the discussions on decentralisation have included new elements. Reference is made to the establishment of new models of governance including the government, the private sector and what is called the civil society for designating community groups and non-profit-making organisations. For example, the governmental documents on the recent municipal reforms refer to the notion of municipal governance (Gouvernement du Québec 2000).

The other important element of that new context is the issue of globalisation. The latter came to be discussed as the new political horizon for the Quebec government and the municipalities as well. It is mainly the economic aspects of globalisation to which these discussions refer. Indeed, globalisation is most time synonymous of a global market imposing constraints upon national and local

actors, revealing the predominance of a neoliberal and corporatist discourse on globalisation (Boyer and Drache 1996). The strengthening of the global competitiveness of national economies has been presented as the most appropriate avenue for facing the challenges raised by globalisation. The signatures of the FTA and NAFTA contributed to legitimise this economic reading of globalisation. One of the consequences of those discussions around globalisation has been the redefinition of the perspectives on the role of local actors and, more particularly, of metropolitan regions. We will see in the third section how the metropolitan regions are increasingly discussed on a local/global axis. They are now seen as poles of growth that have to be competitive at the global level. This also implies that the local administrations have to be capable of facing the challenges raised by the processes of globalisation. This emphasis on the required competitiveness and flexibility of urban regions in the context of globalisation has been one key element invoked by the Bouchard government.

2.2. The White Paper on the restructuring of municipal governance

The publication of the White Paper by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and of the Metropolis in 2000 marked the beginning of the implementation of a new wave of municipal reforms. Since the mid-1990s, the discussions about new reforms in order to overcome what the government called the status quo began to be more and more significant. Various factors paved the way for governmental interventions, such as: the debates about the adoption of a policy on rurality, indicating the necessity of rethinking urban planning and the occupancy of rural territory; the adoption of Bill 92 in 1997 on the Commission for the development of the metropolis ("Commission sur le développement de la métropole"), pointing out the need for addressing the problems of the Montréal region⁹; the 1996

⁹The Bill 92 was to a large extent a following of the report of the Groupe de travail sur Montréal et sa région (GTMR) set up in 1992. The mandate given to this group was to evaluate the situation and to propose solutions to economic, social, administrative problems of the Montréal region. The report emphasised the need of improving the management capacity of local actors. These discussions about the situation of Montréal pointed out the necessity of reforming the municipal organisation and administrative procedures. Cf. Hamel 2001: 108-109

Politique de consolidation des communautés locales that aims at facilitating municipal amalgamation; and the debates on fiscal equity and the management capacity of municipal institutions.

The portrait of the municipal situation in the White Paper appeared quite complex¹⁰. The legitimising of the reform is linked to the resolution of many issues. First of all, as in the 1960s, the problem of the municipal fragmentation resulting from the too large number of municipalities is pointed out. The small size of the municipalities imposes severe limits on their capacity to address issues that go beyond their territorial limits and to assume new responsibilities. The large number of municipalities (more than 1,300) raised important problems: the lack of a global vision on municipal politics; an unproductive and unequal competition between them; a multiplication of structures bringing about additional costs; and fiscal disparities between municipalities. The existing forms of inter-municipal collaboration turn out to be too limited with regard to these problems. In addition, the system of governmental grants does not create incentives to have recourse to these forms of co-operation or to amalgamations.

Another issue raised in the White Paper is the problems faced by urban agglomerations. In addition to the general problems mentioned above, they are also confronted with the problem of urban sprawl, the concentration of social problems, and the lack of strong socio-economic poles that would increase their competitiveness at the national and global levels. A section is dedicated to the specific situation of the three urban communities (Montréal, Québec City and the Hull-Gatineau). Despite their achievement in different sectors, their structures should nonetheless be restructured for increasing their competitiveness and their management capacity while achieving economies of scales. In the governmental perspective, increasing the management capacity of the supramunicipal tier

¹⁰ Indeed, in the introduction of the White Paper, the Minister mentioned that the local institutions have to address common issues that are at the heart of the social, cultural and economic development of the Quebec society: territorial planning; protection of the environment; economic development in the context of a globalising economy; fiscal equity; and social justice (Livre Blanc

should do this. The last issue is the implementation of the governmental policy on rurality. This would require a reinforcement of the decision-making capacity of the rural communities that may imply the amalgamation of municipalities or the strengthening of the role of the MRCs.

The solution chosen by the government for resolving these issues has been two complementary strategies¹¹. The first strategy was the forced merger of local municipalities. The government aimed at applying this strategy within the urban agglomerations of Montréal, Québec City and Outaouais. The imposition of merger was also envisaged in other Quebec regions. The second strategy was the reinforcement of urban agglomerations and of MRCs, allowing them to become competitive and efficient poles of development within the whole Quebec territory. In the governmental perspective, this means the reorganisation of the structures and the transfer of powers. As regards with the three urban communities (CUM, CUQ, CUO), the government proposed the creation of three metropolitan communities, succeeding to the existing urban communities, with newly redefined and exclusive powers such as: area planning, public transportation, social housing, economic development, supralocal facilities and activities; and environmental management. A council composed of designated members will administer each metropolitan community. Regarding the MRCs, the government proposed to broaden their competencies. New competencies would be transferred to the MRCs: the planning and co-ordination regarding civil security and fire prevention; waste management; the financing of social housing; and the sharing of the financing and management of supralocal facilities, activities, and services¹².

2000: IX).

¹¹The government identified three specific objectives aimed by the reform: 1) the adoption of a collective vision on the future of the communities; 2) the taking into account of the governmental objectives with respect to planning and sustainable development, involving, among other things, the struggle against urban sprawl and the respect of agricultural activities; 3) the increasing of efficiency of the municipal sector that would allow for a decrease of the fiscal burden and, at the same, a more equitable fiscal repartition. (Gouvernement du Québec 2000: 55-7).

¹²These new competencies were added to the MRCs' existing powers. The government proposed also a list of facultative competencies that the MRCs can decide to exert.

2.3 The implementation of the reform: the example of Montréal

Despite the protestations and the opposition, the government went ahead with its reform. In this section, we restrict our discussion to the implementation of the reform in the Montréal region. The government followed a two-tier strategy. The first step was the creation of a metropolitan community, the Montréal Metropolitan Community (“Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal”) (MMC), covering the territory of the census metropolitan region defined by Statistics Canada and encompassing more than 3.4 million of inhabitants (Bill 134). By creating the MMC, the government aimed at establishing a strategic authority with specific competencies: area planning, protection of the environment, economic development, international promotion, and management of metropolitan activities¹³. The MMC is composed of representatives chosen among the elected officials of the sixty-four municipalities within the five administrative regions that constitute the metropolitan region. The government attributed to the MMC the specific mandate of developing a metropolitan plan for area planning and development. The goal of this plan is to set up “a strategic vision of economic, social, and environmental development aiming at facilitating a coherent exercise of the Community’s powers” (Gouvernement du Québec, 2000, art. 127, par 1; our translation). The MMC’s mandate also includes the supervision of agencies with a metropolitan vocation (the Metropolitan Transport Agency, the Agricultural Consultative Agency, and Montréal International) and of special commissions. In May 2001, five commissions had been established in the following areas: transport, land-use planning, economic planning and metropolitan facilities, environment, and social housing.

Despite its metropolitan vocation, the MMC does not represent a regional government. Until now, it disposes of few powers and resources for convincing

¹³The MMC has only exclusive competencies with respect to metropolitan-level facilities, infrastructure, services and activities, and the international promotion of the region. Regarding its

the municipalities and economic actors to develop and share a common vision of the metropolitan interests. Its capacity of elaborating a real development strategy for the metropolitan region seems rather limited. In that context, it can be hardly assumed that a common vision and a substantial intervention strategy would arise from the MMC's activities.

The second step of the municipal reform was the amalgamation of the municipalities on the Island of Montréal, creating a mega-city of 1.8 million of inhabitants (Bill 170) that came into existence on January 1st 2002. The government also established an updated territorial-management structure through the creation of twenty-seven boroughs. These boroughs respected the former borders of the main urban neighbourhoods of Montréal and of the former suburbs. The responsibilities of the new boroughs involve the delivering of services: urban planning; fire prevention; waste removal; local, economic, community, and social development; culture and recreational activities; borough parks, local roadwork; and the infringements on the ban regarding the conversion of buildings into condominiums. In fact, the boroughs have only two exclusive competencies, i.e. fire prevention and the infringements regarding the conversion of buildings. As for their other responsibilities, they are shared with the administration of the city of Montréal. In addition, the boroughs have no power of taxation. Their budget derives from the city council's grants. Consequently, the boroughs constitute rather administrative and consultative structures than decision-making centres that can influence the balance of power. In other words, the municipal reform contributes to reinforce the institutional basis of the city of Montréal while substantially broadening its spheres of competencies.

2.4 The late and unsuccessful mobilisation of the opposition

The opposition largely resulted from the Quebec government policy on forced mergers, especially the mergers on the territory of the previous urban

other competencies, it has to share its powers with the city of Montréal and the city's boroughs.

communities. From the release of the White Paper until the municipal elections in November 2001 in the newly created cities, the mayors from the suburban as the ones from the urban and rural affected by the governmental decisions attempted to block the project. They launched different strategies aiming at mobilising their fellow citizens: petitions, street demonstrations, advertising in the media, public meetings, etc. They reclaimed many times the organisation of referendums on municipal mergers. The Bouchard government always rejected this demand, what appeared somewhat paradoxical. New municipal political parties, largely based on a coalition from ex-mayors of the suburbs such as the Union des citoyens et citoyennes de l'île de Montréal had been formed for the election of November 2001. Their victory would have threatened the viability of the governmental project. However, this scenario did not happen.

The opposition against mergers raised different arguments (Hamel 2002). They questioned the economic rationality of the project, notably the fiscal equity and the achievement of economies of scales. For many mayors from the suburbs, the project would bring a significant increase of the level of taxation, threatening their competitiveness. The establishment of supramunicipal structures was seen as a threat to local democracy. They doubted that the creation of new bureaucratic structures would bring a greater accessibility to services. They were not convinced by the presumed efficiency of the future municipal institutions, especially the megacities. Rather, the opposition emphasised the need to preserve the cultural and historical distinctiveness of the existing municipalities. They referred to the presence on a strong sense of belonging to those areas and the sharing of a common identity. However, the opposition did not raise debates about one major argument used by the government: the constraints imposed by the new global economy. Nor the opponents questioned the nature of these constraints, neither the choice of the governmental strategy for facing them. We will see in the following section that the governmental strategy in regard to globalisation constitutes the weak point of its reform.

3. The recent municipal reforms in the context of local and global restructuring

Over the last thirty years, metropolitan regions experienced a series of transformations that have affected substantially city life, city forms, and the overall urban structures (Soja, 2000; Bassand, 2001; Dear, 2002). An increasing segmentation of the labour market coupled with the prevalence of the service-sector economy are among the most important phenomena capable of explaining why and how urban economy has been restructured with its impact on the relocation of social and economic activities (Corade and Lacour, 1995). The new urban hierarchy has often been explained by referring to economic globalisation (Kratke, 1992). The impact of economic globalisation on cities is noticeable, among other things, through the new waves of immigration. This impact is also visible in several social and cultural transformations that can be analysed in terms of opportunities or constraints for local milieu and their population (Bauman, 1998).

Such a perspective is in tune with an approach that is pressing us to bring back cities or places in our analysis of economic globalisation. Several reasons are given by Saskia Sassen (1999) to explain the importance of including cities in our understanding of global processes, starting with the fact that it «allows us to see the multiplicity of economies and work cultures in which the global information is embedded» (Sassen, 1999: 141). The impact of globalisation on localities appeared diversified, depending on leeway available to them due to a combination of market conditions and public resources. In diverse ways, cities «behave strategically» in accordance with their capacity to mobilize local resources and/or to count on government support (Savitch and Kantor, 2003).

In Canada in 2001, 80% of the population was living in urban centres (an increase of 5.2% in comparison to 1996) (Sgro, 2002: 1). Since 1941, the urban population has grown steadily. And this increase is concentrated mainly in four extensive urban regions, including Montréal. After the Second World War, like

other metropolitan regions of the Western world, Montréal underwent economic processes of restructuring closely linked to changes in urban forms. These transformations took place at a metropolitan scale and involved a new experience of mobility and centrality for residents (Ascher, 1998). At the outset, the political and administrative consequences of these changes were difficult to grasp and, since the 1960s, they were put back on the policy agenda (Andrew, Graham and Philips, 2002).

The issue of regulating the new urban reality can be connected to a growing tension between the fragmentation of its main components on the one hand and, on the other, the necessity to provide coherence for public action (Le Galès, 1998). This tension raises several questions. Under what conditions the central city or the city region can become a collective actor (Bourdin, 2000) able to deal with superior tiers of government and with external economic forces? Consequently, what are the dominant interests of the central city in comparison to the ones of the city region? To start with, can central city and city region share the same collective – economic, social, cultural, environmental and urban – project as Dreier, Mollenkopf and Swanstrom (2001) are suggesting?

These questions are particularly important in the new metropolitan context. The necessity of revising old planning institutions and the local political system in order to take into account the expansion of territorial boundaries of the metropolis goes hand in hand with a repositioning of local actors. Here it is interesting to notice, following Christian Lefèvre (1998), how recent metropolitan governance reforms in most Western countries have been conducted with cooperation of local actors in comparison to the top-down approach of previous attempts. This strategy has to be linked to the «disappearance of central government as the holder of supreme legitimacy and capable, by itself, of imposing, or at least shaping, a particular idea of public action» (Lefèvre, 1998: 18). In this regard, the institution is not created in advance or 'ready to use'. It appears as the result of a constitutive process. From then on, «Metropolitan governance does not consider

the institution to be pre-established – on the contrary. The objective to be achieved is not fixed in advanced, but becomes the product of the system of actors as the process unfolds» (Lefèvre, 1998: 18). In other words, the top-down approach has been replaced by a collaborative approach with local actors.

These changes also refer to the broader debate between the old and new version of regionalism. As Andrew Sancton has recalled, in Canada by comparison to the United States at least at the beginning of the twentieth century (but it was true lately as well) «provincial legislatures have been much more likely to change local structures of government without first attaining local consent» (Sancton, 2001: 544). The reasons explaining these differences are numerous starting with the precedence of home rule in the United States and the role played by the private sector in the shaping of governance models at the local level. Our idea here is less to compare the two countries than to highlight what is specific to the Canadian experience and more particularly, to the Quebec experience in matters of urban governance and metropolitan reform.

As previously mentioned, the recent municipal reform in Quebec is characterized, among other things, by a top-down approach that imposed to local actors a new metropolitan structure of coordination. The emphasis on processes – which was there in 1996 when the provincial government announced its intention to promote the Montréal metropolitan region – has been overtaken two years later by an approach focussing on institutional structures. This orientation has been adopted following from an unsuccessful attempt made by the provincial government to implement a hybrid Commission of Development for the Metropolis (CDM). This commission would have been presided over by the minister of Municipal Affairs and the Metropolis, where elected officials were supposed to rub shoulders with representatives of socio-economic groups and para-public institutions.

The failure of this strategy resulted from the difficulty of bringing together interests of people living in the central city with those of the outer suburbs located

on the North and South Shores. These suburbanites think that they do not need the central city to survive and, more importantly, they do not want to pay for the mismanagement of the central city. The challenge of the metropolitan reform in 1996 was to convince the citizens of outer suburbs that it was not fair to let only the citizens of the central city pay for regional functions they were benefiting the whole metropolitan community. This challenge turned out too problematic to be undertaken.

The imposed metropolitan solution in 2002 based on the merging of municipalities on the Island of Montréal and on the South Shore coupled with a supra-municipal tier of coordination and planning at the regional scale – the Montréal Metropolitan Community (MMC) –, did not follow a governance type approach. Despite the governmental rhetoric, it was the old regionalist model that prevailed.

The provincial government turnover – the idea of adopting a more traditional approach – was not explained by the provincial government, apart from mentioning that there was a limit to obstruction to the government's intention coming from local mayors. Nevertheless, the provincial government, especially the minister of Municipal Affairs and the Metropolis, explained the spirit of the new reform by calling upon the necessity to build a more competitive city region. To achieve this objective, the main tool appeared to be the reduction of municipal fragmentation. The a priori for such a strategy was that, if the objective was to make municipalities more competitive, the necessary solution was the amalgamation of municipalities (Gouvernement du Québec, 2000: 59).

Two other dimensions were also present in the governmental discourse. One was dealing with planning and coordination of municipal activity at a regional level. The other was reducing the gap in terms of fiscal efforts between municipalities. Fiscal disparities were a main concern concerning the financing of

infrastructures and services necessary to the development of the city region due to the fact that the central city fiscal situation was in a serious matter of concern.

The question we should raise is twofold. In the first place, why did the Quebec government see in amalgamation a solution to Montréal's problems, described in reference to a series of economic, spatial, social, and environmental processes, whereas its causes and consequences seem often intertwined and can be connected to the weak performance of the city region in many ways in comparison to other North American metropolises? Secondly, why if it seems so important to organise planning at the scale of the city region to make Montréal more competitive in this globalising world, did the government decide to build at the metropolitan scale such a weak instance of coordination and planning as the MMC?

For the time being, we do not have satisfactorily answers to give. Nonetheless, it is necessary to recognize that, to a large extent, the diagnostic upon which the government based its reform may be considered adequate. What is problematic remains on the normative side and has to deal with how the forced amalgamation was privileged over other course of action, like consensus building solution at the metropolitan region level in order to build a governance tier. We know that such an approach was attempted in the mid-1990s, but we can consider this effort inadequate or insufficient.

When it comes to municipal and metropolitan regionalism, one of the main issues remains the fragmented nature of local government. How is it possible to make planning work and to combine diversified if not opposite interests through steering institutions like metropolitan coalitions or metropolitan tier of government? Is the consolidation of a metropolitan instance or specialised unit of planning for implementing regulation and coordination at the regional scale is sufficient? Conversely, do we need a metropolitan government to limit suburban sprawl, redistribute resources among municipalities of the whole region and

particularly to the central city, and take care of infrastructures, equipments and services of a regional or metropolitan range?

In the literature on metropolitan regionalism, two different paths have been explored lately in reference to these questions. In brief, on the one hand, some researchers suggest that a coercive structure is required. On the other hand, other researchers think that cooperative forms of governance are preferable. For example, C. Mitchell-Weaver, D. Miller and R. Deal Jr have argued that «Top-down directives, though out of favour, are necessary for managing metropolitan development and ensuring fiscal equalization» (2000: 868) whilst other think that piecemeal or ad hoc cooperation is preferable due to the context of uncertainty within which local and metropolitan actors are evolving: «it is a question of a community which must be built by using existing resources, an arduous task, an one which does not seem sufficiently established for the question of the legitimacy of the metropolitan institutions to be considered definitively settled» (Lefèvre, 1998: 23). In this respect, governance solutions appeared to be a kind of institutional «bricolage» that has to be contrasted with sustainable political institutionalisation.

The technocratic discourse underlying the recent municipal and metropolis reform in Quebec by putting forward forced mergers and promoting a weak instance of coordination at the metropolitan scale – the MMC – has been following two opposite strategies. In acting in a directive manner on the Island of Montréal and on the South Shore by forcing municipalities to merge and by counting on the cooperation of the municipalities and other local actors of the whole region to be part of a proposal to achieve metropolitan governance, the Quebec government was sending contradicting messages to local actors and municipalities. Consequently, what was at stake in this reform can be considered from a planning angle.

In his conception of planning in the French context after the Second World War, Lucien Nizard (1973) brought our attention to the main functions that planning practices have to achieve in order to attain their objectives. One of these functions is particularly important regarding the case of the last municipal and metropolitan reform in Quebec, that is to say the function of learning that is often couple to the function of decision. In the words of Nizard, planning is defined in systemic terms as an attempt to regulate in a systematic way a part or the entirety of a social system, onto which planning can act by reflecting its content.

Even though the learning function appears secondary in comparison to the decision function, its role remains difficult to bypass. More importantly, if the learning function – which is responsible for convincing those who will be affected by the planning process and by the new frame of action that is implemented that these are legitimate intervention contributing to improve the situation for everybody on the long term – is not well managed by the planners, the planning process and the subsequent process of implementation of the reform can fail.

If we go back to the recent municipal and metropolitan reform in Montréal, one can ask if it is not before all the learning function that was not properly understood by the provincial planners in charge of the reform. We are not referring here only to those who were opposed to the forced mergers but more generally to all of the local actors who were concerned at a level or another by the reform. The recent «demerger movement» is reflecting only one aspect of this. Other aspects are related to the sense of belonging at the metropolitan region that was not of any concern by the planners during the implementation of the reform whereas one of the main aspect of it was defined in terms of metropolitan governance. In other words, how to create a metropolitan identity? What is the responsibility of planners in this regard? Is it necessary to create or to build a metropolitan citizenship? Can a metropolis can act as a collective actor? What are the conditions or the pre-requisite for this?

For the time being, if Montréal is a metropolitan region in statistical terms, it is far from being one in social and political terms. Maybe we should look at the recent municipal reform as the beginning of a planning process instead as the result of a finished one.

Conclusion

In April 2003, the provincial elections in Quebec brought back on the policy agenda the issue of municipal and metropolitan reform. This can be explained before all by electioneering motives from the Liberals who promised before the electoral campaign – and they have been sticking to this position during the campaign – to provide the municipalities the opportunity of recovering their previous autonomy.

Many analysts have seen this move as a messy situation. At the same time, it reveals that local issues are sensitive ones. The sense of belonging to a local community remains strong. It is true, however, as the defenders of the reform argue, that other values like equity and administrative performance counterbalance its importance.

In the urban and economic context impacted by globalising forces, social inequalities are increasing as much as conflicts of interests (Faure, 2003). Political urban leaders are experiencing a new role in connection with the growing importance of local milieu on the political scene.

Before the Quebec government directly intervened, we did not necessarily have the impression that municipalities and metropolises were new political actors during the debates over amalgamation and the creation of the MMC. The Minister of Municipal Affairs and the Metropolis considered these instances as an inferior tier of governance. This was clearly reflected in the top-down approach that was chosen by the Quebec government to implement the reform. In addition, some of

the main issues the municipalities and the metropolis are dealing with – we can think of environment problems, social poverty, social and economic integration of immigrants – were not thoroughly discussed, even though they were mentioned in the White Paper. Institution building at the metropolitan level, which is increasingly important to resolve the problems mentioned above, were not seriously discussed either.

We can hope that the current re-evaluation of mergers will give the opportunity to local actors to bring back on the agenda not only the issue of power sharing among municipalities and with the provincial of government, but also urban problems and the challenges related to the building of metropolises. It is more than ever at a metropolitan scale those urban problems are increasingly experienced nowadays. This has to be reiterated strongly one more time.

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