

Who Owns the Rights to the City?
Fredericton and the Jerry Springer Film Fiasco
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Abstract: In an era of economic globalization and neo-liberal reforms, the role of cities in defining the boundaries of citizenship is changing. The internationalization of trade, the fragmentation of centralized government, the retrenchment of the welfare state – all characteristics of ‘the new world order’ – raise question as to whether or not the Marshallian conceptualization of citizenship, a trilogy of civil, political and social rights, still applies. This essay examines how the politics of municipal governance and citizenship rights in Canada are being redefined in this shifting global context, as exemplified by the Fredericton, New Brunswick, case of luring and losing the bid for a Jerry Springer movie which would have been shot in the city during the summer and fall of 2002.

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In an era of economic globalization and neo-liberal reforms, the role of cities in defining the boundaries of citizenship is changing. The internationalization of trade, the fragmentation of centralized government, the retrenchment of the welfare state – all characteristics of ‘the new world order’ – raise question as to whether or not the Marshallian conceptualization of citizenship, a trilogy of civil, political and social rights, still applies. This essay shall examine how the politics of municipal governance and citizenship rights are being redefined in this shifting global context, as exemplified by the Fredericton, New Brunswick, case of luring and losing the bid for a Jerry Springer movie which would have been shot in the city during the summer and fall of 2002.

First of all, it must be said that municipalities in Canada are creatures of the province. As enshrined in the Constitution Act of 1982, local governments fall under provincial jurisdiction.¹ Such codification, evidence of a two-tiered (unfortunately, not a triple-tiered) federalist system, has many implications for the understanding of our cities. Mainly, local governments are accountable to the province, rather than to its own citizenry.² The construction of ‘the city,’ therefore, appears superfluous and can be changed at the whim of the provincial legislatures’ needs or demands, as municipal corporations are not a contractual agreement between power-holders and its inhabitants.³ The reason for such legislation, some proponents of federalism maintain, is to encourage provincial growth by leveling the services between municipalities. This ideology is mirrored in the 20th Century practice of provincial governments extending their powers over, and consequently, also limiting, the powers of the city.

In comparison, this notion of the city as an ‘empty shell’ can be located in the journalistic debates which surrounded the Jerry Springer film fiasco in Fredericton. Whereas the city lacked autonomy in marketing itself as an ideal location for the filming of the controversial American talk show host’s feature film, to be titled *Citizen Verdict*, residents of the area had to rely on a provincial body to advance its claims. This provincial body was New Brunswick Film, a branch of Business New Brunswick.⁴ In fact, Fredericton was its second choice for the site of the production; Saint John got the number one bid in the province.⁵ Despite that at least one representative at City Hall, Councilor David Kelly, was advocating the use of Fredericton’s facilities, in his hopes of generating hundreds and thousands of dollars for local businesses as well as numerous short-term jobs and much production experience for those already working in the field, in the end, City Hall had no say.⁶ Thus, one could argue that provincial authority, in this case, transcended the voice of locally elected officials, undermining democracy at the lower levels of society. Whereas local governments are the closest form of political

¹ Evelyn Ruppert, “Who Governs the Global City?” in Isin, p. 277.

² Ibid, p. 277.

³ Ibid, p. 277.

⁴ Tali Folkins, “Springer Movie Passes on NB,” in *Daily Gleaner*, p. D3.

⁵ Ibid, p. D3.

⁶ Heather McLaughlin, “Capital Loses Flick to Port City,” in *Daily Gleaner*, p. B5.

participation one urbanite can attain, the fact that city councils lack authority in issues that deeply concern their locality has severe implications for the conceptualization of citizenship in Fredericton.

Moreover, in addition to municipal authorities' powerlessness vis-à-vis the province, there also appears a tendency to increase the influence of the private sector in the management of the city.⁷ This practice is once again reflective of neo-liberal structural changes, advanced by advocates of *laissez-faire* government under the auspices of increased cost savings, management efficiency and competition generation amongst private sector firms. This shift toward the privatization of municipal services is, according to Evelyn Ruppert, a direct result of provincial reforms: usurpation of the local property tax base, reductions in transfer funds, municipal restructuring from the top-down and the fragmentation of local service delivery to non-elected agencies.⁸

Hence, when Fredericton was vying for the bid of the Jerry Springer production site, the ultimate decision in determining the film's fate rested not with the province or with City Hall, but with the Fredericton Golf and Curling Club, a privately-owned facility who proved the opposite of the adage: "You can't fight City Hall."⁹ Indeed, the elite sporting club did not even have to fight City Hall; they merely declined the film production group's request to use their facility as a filming site, maintaining that the film crew's presence would "be too much of a disturbance for its members."¹⁰ The Fredericton Golf and Curling Club presently has over 600 members, of whom the majority can be identified as the business and property-owning class of the community.¹¹ A full membership at FGCC cost, in 2001, \$1339.75 per season, per person.¹² Also, since the sporting club is not located on the public bus route (Golf Club Road), one may assume that all members have access to a reliable vehicle for the transportation of heavy (and expensive) sporting equipment. The FGCC, therefore, not only played an influential role in the demise of Citizen Verdict as a private business, but also as an elite club, serving interests of its upper-class members above all else.

Likewise, while the rights to governing the city are extended to the private business sector, the city itself is starting to resemble a marketable commodity to be bought and sold by the highest bidder. The internationalization of production and the easy movement of capital across borders facilitated by technology and multi-lateral trade agreements have as a consequence for individuals what many have referred to as 'the race to the bottom.' The similar effect may be observed regarding the city. Although Saskia Sassen claims that 'global cities,' operating within a multi-nodal framework, act in co-operation with each other on various fronts,¹³ much can also be said about the opposite occurrence. For example, when Fredericton was in the running for the film site

⁷ Ruppert, in Isin, p. 276.

⁸ Ibid, p. 276.

⁹ Don MacPherson, "Call Made for Film Facility," in *Daily Gleaner*, p. A3.

¹⁰ Ibid, p A3.

¹¹ McLaughlin, "Capital Loses Springer Flick to Port City," p. B5.

¹² Mike Power, "MacDonald Man of All Trades," in *Daily Gleaner*, p. B7.

¹³ Saskia Sassen, "The Global City," in Isin, p. 48.

competition, it finally lost out to a location in South Africa.¹⁴ NB Film, in a press statement following the FGCC's refusal to co-operate, further claimed that Fredericton 'lost out' because "South Africa offered an incentive program they [film producers] couldn't turn down [...] its lower labour costs."¹⁵ Thus, Fredericton finds itself competing in the global market for private sector jobs, where the biggest incentive remains the lowest wages.

The marketing of the city, thus, finds itself dominating municipal governance, a sharp shift from the service delivery-oriented politics it once purveyed.¹⁶ This ideology has been well-ingrained in the minds of *Daily Gleaner* editors, who declared after the fall of Jerry Springer's stay in Fredericton: "At the heart of the issue is our ability to work together as a business community."¹⁷ Citizenship in Fredericton, apparently, extends only to capitalist owners of the means of production, according to the major local newspaper. The editorial further posits: "What benefits one business really benefits all of us in the end in an increased tax base and additional funds flowing into the economy."¹⁸ Also proponents of the (flawed) trickle down theory of economics, the backbone economic ideology of neo-liberalism, the editors of Fredericton's most circulated newspaper embody in their discourse exactly what the shift from municipal welfarist politics to 'business community' entrepreneurial politics entails.

Also, the notion of governing a municipality like managing a business opens up a political space for business to sit directly or indirectly on local governing bodies. Consequently, these 'partnerships' between local authorities and the private sector further contribute to what could be considered the fragmentation of accountability. Again, the Jerry Springer film fiasco provides a perfect illustration of such an occurrence, as the FGCC remained only accountable to its own members, rather than to the requests of elected officials on city council or to the municipal citizenry at large. Another example of such fragmentation of accountability can be drawn from another case involving the prestigious sports club when a 7.2-acre portion of its land was sold to Greenarm Management in 1999 with the intention of developing an apartment complex in the Hanwell Road area.¹⁹ City council, in turn, upon receipt of the development project proposal, appointed a Planning Advisory Committee to examine the construction. Residents of the area concerned with such issues as increased traffic and waste and water infrastructure were denied access to the Committee's meetings, thus undermining citizens' rights to engage in municipal politics on account of fragmentation of accountability.²⁰

Whereas the institution of local government is weakened, the waning power due in part to the increasing powers conferred by the province or by private businesses

¹⁴ Chisholm Pothier, "NB Film Business Promising," in *Daily Gleaner*, p. B4.

¹⁵ Folkins, p. D3.

¹⁶ Ruppert, in Isin, p. 281.

¹⁷ Daily Gleaner Editorial, "Our Opinion: Big Opportunity Was Missed When Film Turned Away," in *Daily Gleaner*, p. A4.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. A4.

¹⁹ Heather McLaughlin, "Hanwell Residents Shut Out and Irked," in *Daily Gleaner*, p. C1.

²⁰ Ibid, p. C1.

through partnerships and the undertaking of entrepreneurial marketing of the city, the institutional means of citizenship have also weakened.²¹ The consideration of Fredericton as wholly a 'business community' as voiced by the *Daily Gleaner* has serious implications for persons living on the margins as well as the shifting role of municipal government in providing social welfare provisions and services. Welfare politics are pushed on the backbench of governance issues while the marketing of the city to attract private employers for low-cost labour incentives remains a crucial role for municipal and provincial 'management' in a so-called 'global economy.'

Thus, the city as a strategic site for the unfolding of (a) new form(s) of citizenship, in response to problems posed by globalization and neo-liberal policy reforms and practices, remains a contentious focal point for persons concerned with societal welfare over the business-oriented management (and rights holders) of the city. Perhaps, as Saskia Sassen alleges that marginalized persons' mere presence acquires the political space to making claims²², the growing presence of urban centres in the unfolding of global economic politics might also provide a potentiality for making claims in the two-tiered federalist system.

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