



Notes from Round Table on Charter Cities • 25 March 2019 • Metro Hall

Autonomy

How much decision-making autonomy should the city have?

Toronto should be a province or stand-alone. City- state. In most advanced countries, cities are a level of government on their own. Key is separation of powers so they don't get in each other's way.

Don't agree that Toronto should have complete autonomy. Need to empower existing city council to make moves.

Need a modern system of government that recognizes geographic realities.

Autonomy from the city

Local decision-making needs to be considered. Pre-amalgamation there were 5 cities and a borough that looked after local affairs. Education was funded from the local tax base. Worked better than now.

An important principle is subsidiarity, the idea that responsibility for public service and programs should lie at the lowest possible governmental level, closest to the people affected.

Where should the control lie? A more powerful Toronto would also empower people in the constituent parts of the city to participate in decision-making or to make local decisions.

Practicalities

What does a city charter mean from a practical perspective? How would it affect transit, what difference would it have made on the council cuts. What would it tangibly do? The example of local control of schools, how would this affect that?

What does it mean from a services point of view?

Many questions that need to be examined. Governance – how are we making decisions? How does a charter deal with conflict between the city and the province and the city and Ottawa? How would a charter deal with disputes?

On issues like climate change, does it allow any more collaboration; cities working together?

Where to start • Incremental vs sudden change

We need a strategy and vision of a city that works for people. It's important to get clear on information. Should there be a blueprint? There needs to be a way to get agreed principles so we can see where this is going.

Strategically it might make sense to start smaller. Build on what we have.

Wondering about an incremental approach. Is a charter a way to get more flexibility on smaller things?

How many people in Toronto know what's in the city of Toronto Act? Let's start there, deconstruct that: what do we like? What do we want to change? Need to develop high level, core principles that almost everyone in Toronto could buy into.

Keep it simple. Less is more. Complexity in terms of public policy opens up all kinds of Pandora's boxes.

The Los Angeles Charter was a process of development over time. Many issues along the way: division of powers between the mayor and council, secession attempt by the San Fernando Valley. It was a patchwork process over time.

How to sell it

There's a gap between the inner suburbs and downtown Toronto. They see the Toronto as elite and disconnected. If you want to sell the charter idea to the suburbs, you need to talk not only about autonomy from the province, but also autonomy from Toronto.

Strategically, this needs to be about issues, housing, transit, what it means for those things.

This movement needs to reach out north of Dupont. It has been the continuous failure of the progressive movement. Every meeting is downtown. The reach north of Eglinton is non-existent.

Protections and Oversight

Important to be aware of the possible negative repercussions of (a charter).

What happens if a Rob Ford is the head of Charter City? What are the protections against that?

Not in favour of the current system in which the mayor has significant power. Favour a weaker mayor.

The entire culture of the city needs to modernize, management and staff alike. Technological dinosaurs. They value system over people, process over outcome and compliance over innovation. They lack collaboration and agility. How do you address that with a charter? You can't. If we become independent, then what?

Raises example of the Public Advocate in New York, which is a position that is elected city-wide, giving him a lot of clout. There are other ways of organizing things.

GTA Perspective

What about the region? How would a Toronto Charter City relate? How could we work more closely? Does the province need to be the co-ordinating point of GTA municipalities or can the municipalities get together in some kind of regional government to govern regional issues such as GTA transit, environment, roads, etc?

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Notes by Doug Earl