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The Intentional City: Shaping London's Urban Future

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Western University, London, Canada · November 23, 2018

Event Summary

THE INTENTIONAL CITY

Shaping London's Urban Future

A Roundtable to Celebrate the Launch of the **Centre for Urban Policy and Local Governance**



Western



Centre for Urban Policy
and Local Governance

<http://nest.uwo.ca/urbancentre>

On November 23, 2018, Western's **CENTRE FOR URBAN POLICY AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE** hosted its first official event: a public roundtable on **THE INTENTIONAL CITY: SHAPING LONDON'S URBAN FUTURE.**

This was an important moment for the new Centre for Urban Policy and Local Governance, signalling its goal of productively engaging scholars across disciplinary boundaries and building new relationships between Western University researchers and the community. Indeed, roundtable participant Neil Bradford noted that “we underestimate Western, the convening power of the university as a neutral third space on issues”—and highlighted the potential for the Centre to play this role.

London is at a crossroads. Neither a core global city nor a place left behind, it occupies the open middle ground of Ontario's and Canada's urban future. What kind of future do we want for London, and how do we get there? Who should lead, and who needs to be at the table? What can London learn from other mid-size cities? **Fundamentally, can London be an intentional city—one that knows what it is, knows what it wants to become, has assembled the resources, including community and intergovernmental support, to get there?**

These questions guided the roundtable discussion, which is summarized here. Running for almost ninety minutes before a standing-room-only crowd, the roundtable demonstrated a strong appetite in London for civic conversation and debate. The new Centre for Urban Policy and Local Governance looks forward to convening more of them in the future.

After preliminary remarks from Dean of Social Science **Robert Andersen** and Centre Director **Zack Taylor**, **Martin Horak** introduced the five panellists: **Pierre Filion**, Professor in the School of Planning at the University of Waterloo and an expert in mid-sized cities; **Arielle Kayabaga**, Councillor-Elect for City of London's downtown Ward 13; **Michelle Baldwin**, Executive Director of London's Pillar Nonprofit Network and Co-Founder of Innovation Works; **John Fleming**, Managing Director of Planning and City Planner for the City of London; and **Neil Bradford**, Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at Huron University College.

"It's not easy being in the middle"

Martin Horak began by asking Pierre Filion to comment on what it means to be a mid-sized city, and how London fits into the broader urban system. Filion began by saying that "it's not easy to be in the middle." In a time of rising inequality and economic and political polarization at the provincial and national scales, it is hard for slow-growth London to sustain its historical position as a freestanding, medium-size metropolitan area, beyond the orbit of larger, high-growth centres. John Fleming picked up on this theme, characterizing London as "the Winnipeg of Ontario"—a "city in a cornfield." For him, this middle position in the urban system poses distinct challenges and opportunities for attracting talent and the economic growth that goes with it. Drawing on what she observed during her recent election campaign, Arielle Kayabaga suggested that it would be a mistake to see London as unchanging—in fact, there is evidence that Toronto's high cost of living is pushing people toward London. Housing prices and rents are already going up.

"A different entry point into globalization"

The discussion then turned to identifying London's potential pathways to growth and prosperity. Both Fleming and Neil Bradford argued that the traditional model of "chasing smokestacks" by offering tax and other incentives is a dead end, and that economic development must concentrate on people. Fleming made an economic case for investing in the quality of urban spaces and places. Recounting how Oklahoma City lost out on a massive investment from United Airlines in the early 1990s because the company's executives did not believe the city offered its employees a high quality of life, Fleming argued for the importance of "the quality of the city that you build. [Investments in arts programming, cultural facilities, a beautiful public realm] are not just fluff projects. ... These are things that really can attract talent, attract investment, and create jobs. When you create jobs in a municipality, that helps everyone across all demographics. I think we forget that."

Bradford further argued that while many cities have pursued the "creative cities" strategy popularized by economic geographer and urban consultant Richard Florida, one that emphasizes attracting young workers in high-value-added service sectors, mid-size cities need "a different entry point into globalization." According to Bradford, mid-size cities should not try to grow primarily by trying to compete



ROBERT ANDERSEN
Dean of Social Science



ZACK TAYLOR
Director of the Centre for Urban
Policy and Local Governance



PIERRE FILION
Professor, School of Planning,
University of Waterloo

for talent and investment with large, fast-growing metropolises like the Toronto region. Rather, mid-size cities must look closely at how they can leverage their existing human assets and place qualities from the bottom up. Bradford stated forcefully that we do not have “trade off” diversity, inclusion, and growth—we can have all three at the same time.

He went on to say that while it is not explicit, London is already well advanced in pursuing this approach to economic development, which he calls “inclusive innovation.” Michelle Baldwin and Bradford sketched out several examples: a vigorous social enterprise community, the municipality’s broad and deep public engagement as it developed the London Plan, the national Pathways to Prosperity Project based at Western, the Ability First Coalition, and the London Medical Innovation and Commercialization Network. The core question for Baldwin is “how do we make sure we are growing a city that is thinking about an economy for all?” Growth alone is not enough—it’s also about how growth and its benefits are distributed.

“Who gets to decide how our city grows?”

Building on this point, Kayabaga emphasized that it is essential that all of London’s residents participate in deciding how the city will respond to its problems, grow, and evolve into the future. Thinking about growth will be easier “as our city gets better, as we have great programs, people feel included, and people feel like this is a city that they can call their own.”

Horak brought up the evident resistance from developers, business, and residents to recent “long-term and ambitions and plans that really depart from the way that we’ve been. How do you bridge that? How do you make that transition?” Fleming responded by talking about the London Plan, which calls for more “growing up, not out.” He said that by being flexible and creating incentives to an efficient pattern of development, they avoided a “heavy regulatory approach” that would fail in London’s slow-growth environment. Filion pointed out that relatively low housing costs and traffic congestion compared to large metropolitan areas like Toronto means that high-density development is harder to achieve. Much of that market will be occupied by retirees rather than young people.

Later on in the discussion, Baldwin returned to the theme of inclusive deliberation, stating that “it’s about everybody giving up some power and not thinking that this has be their next big thing; ‘what are we doing together?’ rather than ‘what am I doing here and where’s the spotlight for me?’”

“What is London’s story?”

The conversation turned to whether London’s future lay in Toronto’s orbit, or if it will remain a distinct community. Baldwin argued for the latter: “While I want to see high-speed rail and I think we want that connection [to the GTA], I think it’s about the unique value that we have as a community. ... Who are we as human beings in our city, and what’s that sense of belonging? What is London’s story that we can all say we’re a part of? Everyone’s trying to make unique stories, and I think it’s all these stories that makes up London.”



ARIELLE KAYABAGA
Councillor-Elect, Ward 13,
City of London



MICHELLE BALDWIN
Executive Director, Pillar Non-
profit Network



The conversation was moderated by Martin Horak, associate director of the Centre.

But what is London's story? Horak noted that after living in London for fifteen years, "I'm not sure that I've quite figured out what London's story is yet. It seems to be complex and it's really not a place that's defined by one thing." Fleming responded that "one of the reasons ... you can't really read London's story is because the bottom fell out of London's story." Before the 1980s, London was a fast-growing regional diversified economy; afterwards it began to hollow out. "Rewriting the way that we succeed is something that we're still working our way through here. ... I think we've been writing that story over the past 20 to 30 years." Filion noted that, from his perspective living in Kitchener-Waterloo, London feels like a place with a distinct identity and culture. The challenge is for the city to be self-aware and to find the self-confidence to tell new stories while recognizing the old.

Kayabaga said that, "from a millennial perspective, I find it interesting when I hear what other people think of London." London has a reputation for conservatism. It has wonderful heritage. But new stories are being written. "London is what you make it to be. ... For me it's not that conservative any more. It's shifting and it's changing and there's room for that to keep changing."

"Change is hard"

In discussing the city's culture and the potential for change, the conversation perhaps inevitably turned to London's recent debate over rapid transit. Fleming remarked that "London has a track record of ... getting to the precipice, about to take a big leap ... and then London says no, that water looks cold." In short, "change is hard." But, not all change has to be massive. It can also be incremental, "like some of the stuff that Neil's pointing out and Michelle is doing. That's creating change and actually quite rapidly but at a smaller scale which is easier for people to swallow." Nonetheless, Baldwin quoted London civic entrepreneur Kate Graham's proposition that "London needs



JOHN FLEMING
Managing Director of Planning
and City Planner, City of London

to believe that it deserves big things.” At some level, London’s reticence may reflect what Fleming called “a lack of self-confidence as a community.” Fleming noted that “sometimes we put ourselves into false choices ... Are we going to do potholes or are we going to do the flex street? Are we going to deal with poverty or are we going to do the Take Back the River project? It doesn’t have to be necessarily one or the other.” In fact, projects can achieve multiple objectives, work can be staged, and costs can be spread out. Sometimes big actions—like rapid transit—can liberate resources from other levels of government to bundle together goals that would take much longer to achieve incrementally.

Horak asked how we can sustain difficult public conversations about the city’s long-term development when political cycles and attention spans are short. Bradford and Baldwin reiterated the importance of non-governmental organizations. In particular, Bradford pointed to the example of the Civic Action Alliance in Toronto, an enduring, institutionalized organization that brings together actors from multiple sectors in pursuit of “discrete project work on big issues—around the environment, homeless, and transit.” He suggested that London’s Urban League could potentially play a similar role here. Fleming said that “sometimes people don’t look at themselves as champions. I think the more we can give people the feeling that they can do this, and that they can make a difference, the more champions we’ll get, and the more we’ll move forward.”

“There’s important intellectual work to be done”

Martin Horak wrapped up the roundtable by asking what the panellists thought would be the same in twenty years, and what they believed—or hoped—would change. The group’s responses focused on the latter. Kayabaga and Baldwin both hoped for greater inclusion and understanding. Kayabaga stated, “I want to see people love their community enough to see everyone as their community and not the divide between us and them.” Baldwin expressed hope that London will reckon with its poor track record on race relations. Fleming’s desire was for “a really vibrant downtown, one that sends the image of the vibrancy of the community overall, one that is for everyone, that is not exclusionary in any way.” Filion echoed this vision, imagining a downtown “with a mix of social classes ... but most importantly, a lot of people.” Bradford reiterated his call for London to “give meaning and imagination to the mid-size city as a distinct model and strategy ... to guide investments ... and reinforce the distinctive sense of identity.” He concluded with a call for the University, and for the Centre, to embrace a leadership role: “I think there’s important intellectual work to be done to support the people that are on the front lines, actually doing things to build that, and we can do some of the intellectual work that supports ... efforts on the ground.” ■



NEIL BRADFORD
Chair, Dept. of Political Science,
Huron University College

Visit <http://nest.uwo.ca/urbancentre> to view a video or to read a transcript of the roundtable. To join the Centre's mailing list, email zack.taylor@uwo.ca.