

BOOK REVIEWS

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Leaky Governance: Alternative Service Delivery and the Myth of Water Utility Independence

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Water is a highly complex organizational commodity. It is a necessity of life and leisure. It engenders a vast array of political, economic, public health and emotional concerns. Its management, delivery and waste treatment are fraught with conflict, administrative pitfalls, and highly divergent perceptions and unintended long-term outcomes.

Municipalities across Canada and in developed areas around the world are faced with a looming crisis in water supply delivery. The contributory factors are legion: declining quality and inadequate protection of source water, increased regulation and requirement for more intensive treatment, burgeoning urban populations and urban sprawl, need for conservation and environmental sustainability, debate over cost-effectiveness, controversy regarding treatment options such as fluoridation and types of pretreatments and disinfection, deteriorating infrastructure, inadequate funding with an ever-growing and insurmountable gap between revenues and costs, greater consumer awareness, higher public expectations of level and reliability of service, accountability, as well as public desire for transparency and involvement in decision-making. The simplest and most obvious solutions to these problems, such as outsourcing of service delivery, are mired in suspicion and distrust, and yield inconsistent and often unsatisfactory results.

Leaky Governance dissects the many complexities and ramifications that impinge on the problem of water service delivery reform in Canada. In particular, this book examines models of alternative service delivery (ASD) that seek to depoliticize service with the expectation of greater efficiency and to gain independence from the stultifying internal manipulations of municipal government administrative bodies. The concept of ASD emerges as a credible option for municipalities faced with declining staffing and infrastructure, budget cutbacks, public resistance to rate and fee increases, and reallocation of revenues for other municipal projects. The author undertakes a comparative analytical discussion in terms of the original objectives of ASD models, and examines the validity of these models outside the context of privatization ambitions and conflicts. Between the perceived municipal inefficiencies with their vast bureaucratic entanglements at one end, and the brutal technocratic profit-driven corporate agendas at the other, there lies a continuum of possible ASD paradigms to consider.

The author focuses the first part of her treatise on Ontario, where a range of ASD models have been explored by municipalities seeking to streamline water service delivery in response to economic and administrative forces demanding modernization and reform. In the second phase, research has been expanded to include other Canadian examples. While the latter case studies were drawn from the five broad geographic regions as delineated by Environment Canada, individual provinces and territories have fared unevenly: British Columbia and Alberta are disproportionately strongly represented, while Manitoba, Saskatchewan, the three northern jurisdictions, and all of Atlantic Canada except for Nova Scotia, are completely orphaned.

While many ASD models preserve a measure of public ownership, a component of privatization or private sector involvement may be incorporated into a multitude of administrative strategies and to varying extents. The outcomes are heterogeneous: there is no single organizational panacea, and certainly no single unflawed corporate model. Independence and autonomy do not necessarily equate in their application with desired efficiency gains. Many inherent impediments present resistance to reform, and arise for different reasons from both the public recipients of the service and from within various interfacing municipal government departments.

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A deeper examination of the latter reveals the often disparate and conflicting attitudes to ASD implementation on the part of various decision-makers within municipal governments, underlining the complexity and diversity of obstacles which need to be overcome before consensus-building can be contemplated.

In the end, it is ultimately not possible to separate politics and management. Adoption of ASD must be harmonized with appropriate adjustments in the multiplicity of governance and institutional operations. ASD in isolation from municipal governance authority cannot in itself achieve the desired end. Though various ASD models may address particular challenges plaguing sustainable water service delivery, each model remains “leaky,” because linkage between service and local government cannot be eliminated. Both need to be revised and rethought in the face of emerging and intensifying demands for improvement.

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