Legacies of the Megacity: Toronto’s Amalgamation 20 Years Later

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Executive Summary

In 1998, Metropolitan Toronto and its six lower-tier municipalities – Toronto, Etobicoke, Scarborough, North York, East York, and York – were amalgamated to form the new City of Toronto. The decision to amalgamate was controversial. Proponents argued that streamlining service delivery would yield major cost savings for the city and its residents. Opponents claimed that eliminating Metro’s lower-tier municipalities would diminish the quality of democratic representation.

Twenty years later, what can be said about Toronto’s experience with amalgamation? Are residents better served by a single, large government than they were by the previous two-tier metropolitan model?

On March 27, 2018, the Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance (IMFG) convened a panel to address these questions. The discussion brought together two people who were directly involved in Toronto’s amalgamation and subsequent reorganization – John Matheson and Shirley Hoy – as well as three academics – Alexandra Flynn, Enid Slack, and Zack Taylor.

This Forum paper does not offer a comprehensive assessment of Toronto’s experience with amalgamation; rather, it provides a synthesis of the panellists’ remarks as well as of the broader discussion that followed.

Toronto’s experience with amalgamation is decidedly mixed. Despite the Province’s predictions, there is limited evidence that consolidating the lower-tier municipalities led to notable cost savings. Yet democratic accountability and transparency have improved somewhat under the new system. The streamlining of political decision-making and the creation of various oversight bodies – including the Auditor General, the Integrity Commissioner, the Office of the Ombudsperson, and the Lobbyist Registrar – are welcome developments.

The panel also reported some deeper, structural problems that amalgamation has either highlighted or exacerbated. Toronto still faces many of the same governance challenges it confronted in the 1990s. The lack of coordination with the City’s regional partners across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) remains an issue. The Province’s decision to limit reorganization to Metro’s boundaries has inhibited long-term regional planning and effective service coordination. The city also confronts political challenges within its own boundaries. Amalgamation has reduced opportunities for meaningful civic engagement. And divisions between the old City of Toronto and the surrounding suburbs have deepened. While opportunities for inclusive governance abound, bridging ever-widening divides between groups of Toronto residents presents a more daunting task.
Introduction

During the mid-1990s, facing pressure to reduce public spending, the Ontario government initiated municipal amalgamations across the province. Both the scope and pace of these institutional changes were extraordinary. Between 1996 and 2000, the number of municipalities in Ontario was reduced from 850 to 445.¹

In December 1996, the Ontario government announced its plan to eliminate Metropolitan Toronto and its constituent parts – Toronto, Scarborough, North York, York, East York, and Etobicoke – and replace it with the new City of Toronto. Local politicians and many residents opposed amalgamation, arguing that eliminating the lower-tier municipalities would threaten the quality of democratic representation. Proponents, on the other hand, claimed that amalgamation would produce a more cost-effective, transparent, and responsive local government. On January 1, 1998, Metropolitan Toronto and its six lower-tier municipalities were officially amalgamated.

It has been 20 years since that time. The anniversary provides an opportunity to revisit the initial impetus for this decision as well as to examine the consequences of this profound shift in local governance.

In March 2018, the Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance (IMFG) assembled a panel to discuss Toronto’s experience with amalgamation. The panellists included two practitioners who played a central role during the amalgamation process. In addition, three academic experts were asked to discuss the effect of amalgamation on the city’s governance. The panellists were:

- John Matheson, former Chief of Staff, Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (currently a principal at StrategyCorp)
- Shirley Hoy, former City Manager, City of Toronto (currently at StrategyCorp)
- Alexandra Flynn, Assistant Professor, University of Toronto Scarborough
- Zack Taylor, Assistant Professor, Western University
- Enid Slack, Director, Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance (moderator)

The panellists were asked to address the following questions:

- To what extent has amalgamation achieved its intended policy goals (i.e., cost-savings, improving accountability, and transparency)?
• Are residents ultimately better served by a single, large government than they were by the previous two-tier Metropolitan model?
• What governance challenges lie ahead for the Toronto and the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA)? To address these challenges, does the region require the creation of new governance structures?

The next two sections describe how Toronto’s experience with metropolitan governance evolved over time and revisit the decision by the Ontario government to amalgamate Toronto, identifying some of the main policy drivers as well as the contextual forces shaping the Province’s decision. The following section turns to the main consequences of Toronto’s amalgamation. The conclusion identifies some of the lessons drawn from Toronto’s experience with amalgamation.

This paper is not a systematic examination of Toronto’s experience with amalgamation. Rather the aim is to summarize the insights from the March 2018 discussion. To contextualize some of the panellists’ remarks, the paper incorporates insights from the secondary literature on municipal restructuring.

The Evolution of Local Governance in Toronto

Toronto’s experiment with metropolitan governance began after the Second World War, in a period characterized by the baby boom, increases in immigration, and significant migration into Toronto and other urban centres. These economic and demographic shifts produced unprecedented challenges for local governments.

Although the construction of new infrastructure was deemed essential, many municipalities lacked revenues to finance these capital-intensive projects. One solution was to create two-tier metropolitan governance structures, so that resources could be pooled to finance infrastructure throughout the larger region. Toronto and its surrounding area was a prime candidate for this arrangement. The city’s rich industrial base could be leveraged to finance capital projects in the city’s suburban areas.

In 1953, the Province passed The Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto Act, creating a two-tier governance structure: the upper-tier – Metropolitan (Metro) Toronto – and 13 lower-tier municipalities – the old City of Toronto and its 12 surrounding municipalities. Under this system, the city functioned as a federated structure. Policy responsibilities were divided between the upper and lower tiers. The Regional Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto could borrow capital and collect and distribute revenues, allowing it to maintain facilities and provide services across the region. The upper tier was given power over other regional issues, including highways and arterial roads, public transportation, property assessment, and water and sewer treatment facilities. Lower-tier municipalities oversaw issues of local importance, such as licensing and inspections, fire protection, and garbage collection and disposal.

In its first couple of decades, Metro’s governance was lauded as a story of success. At an impressive speed, the city managed to overcome “serious public service deficiencies.” Metro leveraged its larger tax base to build rapid transit lines, establish a network of arterial highways, and construct facilities for the treatment of water and sewage. Many credited the city’s success to an effective balancing of local representation and regional responsiveness. Toronto’s two-tier system effectively pooled revenues from across the region, allowing the city to maintain a “vibrant core” while providing “the necessary infrastructure for the orderly growth of the suburbs.”

In 1965, Ontario’s Royal Commission on Metropolitan Toronto endorsed Toronto’s two-tier system, but recommended consolidating the number of lower-tier municipalities. In 1967, smaller municipalities – such as Leaside, Weston, and Swansea – were absorbed into neighbouring municipalities, reducing the number of lower-tier municipalities from 13 to six (see Figure 1). Over time, more responsibilities – including licensing, waste disposal, ambulance services, and policing – were shifted from the lower-tier municipalities to the Metro governance level.

The 1970s witnessed a shift in the geographical distribution of political power. At the time of Metro’s inception, the old City of Toronto wielded enormous political power, representing half of the 24 members on the Metropolitan Toronto Council. Over the subsequent decades, suburban municipalities were the sites of immense population growth and economic development; these changes affected political representation at the Metro level. Once they held a majority of seats on Metro’s council, suburban councillors became less concerned with funding infrastructure projects in the city’s core.

In 1977, on the recommendations of a second royal commission, led by former Ontario Premier John Robarts, the Province sought to address some of these problems. The commission proposed the direct election of Metro councillors, leaving only the mayors of the six municipalities to sit on both upper- and lower-tier councils. This reform was not introduced until 1988, and by providing democratic legitimacy to two separate bodies, it only intensified existing jurisdictional conflicts between Metro and the lower-tier municipalities.

At the same time, population growth in the areas surrounding the city introduced new concerns about policy
coordination. The region faced numerous policy challenges – including public transit, land-use planning, and economic development – that extended well beyond Metro’s scope of influence. Rather than extend Metro’s boundaries, however, in the 1970s the provincial government decided to replicate the Metro model, creating various regional governments – York, Durham, Peel, and Halton – to the north, east, and west. The Province’s decision led Metro to shift its policy focus inwards. By the 1970s, Metro’s regional planning function had become “increasingly irrelevant.”

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a growing sense that local governance in Toronto had become “dysfunctional.” First, Metro was incapable of addressing policy problems that extended beyond its boundaries. Second, the intensification of global trade increased economic competition. Companies wanted to (re)locate their operations in jurisdictions with lower taxes and fewer administrative agencies and rules. With two separate levels of government, Metro Toronto was often criticized for unnecessary policy overlap and gridlock. Third, because of a deep recession in the early part of the 1990s, governments at all levels were looking for ways to reduce costs. The recession placed new pressure on Metro and its lower-tier municipalities to deliver local services more cost-effectively.

By the 1990s, with the population of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) approaching five million people, there was a concerted push for regional governance. In 1995, the Ontario government appointed the Task Force on the Future of the Greater Toronto Area. Chaired by Anne Golden, the Task Force was asked to assess the “health and workability” of Metro Toronto and the broader GTA. It concluded that at the core of most of the region’s problems was “a fundamental lack of coordination.” The Task Force called for new governance structures that could better address region-wide issues such as transportation, infrastructure, and other planning decisions.

The Golden Report urged the Province to eliminate the GTA’s five regional governments – Metro Toronto, York, Peel, Halton, and Durham – and replace them “with a single Greater Toronto government that has clear responsibility for planning and coordination on matters of region-wide interest.” Reflecting a sensitivity to local democracy, the report called for retaining and strengthening the powers of lower-tier municipalities across the GTA.

These recommendations were echoed by other expert groups. In 1996, the provincially appointed Who Does What Panel offered a similar set of recommendations. The Panel urged the Province to eliminate the five upper-tier governments across the GTA and create a governance structure that could coordinate service delivery for the GTA as a whole. With one exception, the Province did not follow the recommendation of either the Task Force or the Panel, limiting the restructuring focus to municipalities within Metro’s existing boundaries.
Revisiting the Decision to Amalgamate

In December 1996, the newly elected Conservative government announced plans to eliminate Metro and its lower-tier municipalities, replacing them with a single structure.¹⁵ Four months later, the government introduced the enabling legislation, Bill 103, *The City of Toronto Act*. The announcement prompted bitter political opposition from various stakeholders, residents, and opposition parties in the Ontario Legislature.¹⁶

Under the government’s proposed plan, the new City of Toronto would be governed by a single Mayor-Council system. Councillors would be elected under a ward system, while the mayor would be elected at large. Initially, Toronto's City Council comprised 57 councillors plus the mayor. This was a notable departure from the former system, which had had 106 elected officials across the six former municipalities.¹⁷

The Context

In June 1995, power changed hands at Queen’s Park. Early in its mandate, the newly elected Conservative government signalled that its top priority would be to eliminate the Province’s $6-billion deficit. The macroeconomic conditions described in the previous section helped reinforce the government’s focus on the deficit.

According to John Matheson – who served as chief of staff to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing at the time – the new government had been briefed about the dire state of public finances in the province. As Matheson recalled:

> We were told that the Ministry of Finance had several different scenarios of where the finances of the Province were headed. In the most pessimistic scenario, which projected continued levels of spending but increasing interest rates, the Province’s debt service charges were forecast to go from roughly 15 percent to roughly 30 percent of the total provincial spend. If this scenario had come to pass, it would have significantly displaced other program spending.

Yet the government had limited its own options for reducing the deficit. For starters, the government believed that “Ontario had hit a tax wall… [that] it was already the most highly taxed subnational jurisdiction in North America.” The government had been elected on a platform to provide tax relief, so raising taxes was “not an option.”

Second, the Province was restricted in terms of what spending cuts it could enact. During the campaign, it had promised voters that health care and education would be spared expenditure cuts. These fiscal commitments made the task of reducing the deficit particularly challenging. Health care consumed about 30 percent of the provincial budget, and education represented an additional 17 percent. In combination with its debt repayment, more than half the provincial budget was deemed off-limits. With the big-ticket items off the table, the Province was forced to look elsewhere.

Ultimately, it turned to the “other” category, which included transfers to municipalities. As Matheson clarified: “The municipal sector was not the thing that was driving the government of Ontario … the politics of the budget and the deficit is what was driving the government.” It was unclear at the time, however, how the new government at Queen’s Park planned to rationalize the sector.

The Motivations

Efforts to reform the municipal sector began with the provincial government’s *Savings and Restructuring Act* in 1996. Although Toronto was exempted from this initial round of restructuring, the 1996 legislation underlined the Province’s thinking. First, the Province believed that with fewer and larger municipalities, municipal governance could be streamlined, reducing duplication and overlap in service provision and thereby lowering local expenditures. Second, by streamlining the delivery of services and imposition of taxes, amalgamation could improve residents’ capacity to hold local elected officials to account.¹⁸

In the case of Toronto, however, the potential for cost savings was less clear. For one thing, three of the most significant local expenditures – welfare assistance, policing, and transit – were already Metro’s responsibility. These three expenditures represented 70 percent of the total upper-tier and lower-tier expenditures combined, reducing the potential for further savings.¹⁹ For another, as Enid Slack remarked, the lower-tier municipalities had “different service levels and different wage scales.” Pressure would mount to use the municipality with the highest service level and wage scale as the new baseline.

Throughout 1997 and 1998, the Province’s public justification for Toronto’s amalgamation was cost savings. As Shirley Hoy recalled, the Province made the argument that this would lead to “significant administrative savings”; amalgamation would reduce the number of elected officials and eliminate layers of management staff across the bureaucracy. Over the years though, questions have been raised about whether cost savings was really what was driving the provincial government’s decision. As one analyst has suggested: “The real source of the Toronto amalgamation decision remains a mystery. It clearly did not emerge from [the party platform] or from any other pre-election statement of party policy.”²⁰
Matheson attempted to clear up the confusion, claiming that amalgamation was “robustly debated” by the cabinet. The government pushed ahead with amalgamation, he argued, for two main reasons. First, it saw amalgamation as helping achieve its most important policy goal: a reduction in public spending. Second, the government was concerned about Toronto’s competitiveness on the global stage. Toronto’s two-tier system was thought to be riddled with service duplication and too many politicians, inhibiting its competitiveness.

According to Matheson, throughout his tenure, the premier came to see “strong city-regions” as the “building blocks of the new global economy.” Matheson described how a trade mission trip to Japan in the mid-1990s reinforced this consideration. In his book, Promised Land: Inside the Mike Harris Revolution, John Ibbitson provides a similar assessment of the government’s motives, explaining how “coherence and competitiveness” arguments ultimately won the premier over. Ibbitson also points to the role of politics. Toronto City Council had been a key source of political opposition, a thorn in the premier’s side. Amalgamation would strengthen the representation of Toronto’s suburbs, diluting the political power of some of the provincial government’s fiercest critics. In his remarks, Matheson played down the significance of this power struggle, arguing that these strategic imperatives were not motivating the government but were rather a “pleasant byproduct” of amalgamation.

To build public support for its position, the Province decided to focus on the expected cost savings from amalgamation. As Matheson suggested, in retrospect, this might have been a mistake. The decision was made, in large part, because this was “the easiest thing to communicate” and also because it was “what people expected this government to say.” In choosing to frame amalgamation this way, though, other potential benefits, including its effect on economic competitiveness, fell by the wayside. As Matheson recalled, once the cost-savings narrative took root, the media and the public were “less interested” in hearing about the other advantages of amalgamation.

**To what extent has amalgamation succeeded in achieving its goals?**

**A More Efficient City Government?**

The Golden Report warned that “the benefits of amalgamation and consolidation are often over-stated.” Yet the Province adamantly defended its position, claiming that the move was essential to the city’s fiscal health. To what extent did the new City of Toronto meet its intended goal of saving money? In her remarks, Enid Slack discussed research attempting to quantify the impact of amalgamation. In a 2013 study, she and Richard Bird compared expenditures (per household, adjusted for inflation) in the pre- and post-amalgamation periods across four policy areas – fire protection, parks and recreation, garbage collection, and libraries – all of which had been under the responsibility of the lower-tier municipalities. With one exception – libraries – these expenditures all increased after amalgamation. Slack said, “We can’t actually explain why this happened… all we can see is that expenditures per household went up.”

Ibbitson explained that determining the effect of amalgamation on local spending is particularly hard in Toronto’s case, since the Province had introduced other major fiscal changes, including Local Services Realignment, at the same time.

**The Effect of Amalgamation on Local Governance**

The panellists described how the creation of new institutional structures or practices has improved the quality of local governance in post-amalgamation Toronto.

Shirley Hoy identified the steps taken to strengthen the quality of public administration in the new City of Toronto. In her view, amalgamation has helped “accelerate the professionalization of the City’s public service.” This has been an important development, particularly given the increased “size, scope, and complexity of the various programs and services the City is now in charge of.” Hoy also talked about a concerted effort to improve transparency and accountability at Toronto City Hall. New oversight institutions have been created, including the Auditor General, the Integrity Commissioner, the Office of the Ombudsperson, and the Lobbyist Registrar. As she argued, these have “all contributed to the proper formalization of the council and public service relationship” and have led to a “much more effective public service.”

Zack Taylor also described how amalgamation simplified some of the City’s operations and decision-making processes. Since amalgamation, Taylor observed, the city has “one mayor, one zoning bylaw, one budget, and a single public service that reports to one council.”

Beyond simplifying decision-making, the City has also taken some ad hoc steps to better incorporate citizens’ views
into policymaking. Alexandra Flynn discussed a public budgeting pilot introduced by the City Manager’s Office. The program allows residents from vulnerable areas of the city to participate “directly in budgeting initiatives.” This is an important experiment in local governance, allowing marginalized residents to choose how funds are invested in their communities. In a similar vein, Flynn discussed the City Planning Division’s creation of the Toronto Planning Review Panel, a 32-member advisory body of Toronto residents randomly selected by civic lottery. The initiative was introduced to include a “more diverse set of opinions” in the Division’s consultation process.

Toronto seems to be experimenting with different modes of governance to improve accountability and democratic participation. These initiatives, however, are generally led by individual divisions rather than the City. Flynn recommended that Toronto review participation and inclusion at a city-wide level, as the cities of Victoria and Mississauga have done.

Flynn also described the ways in which opportunities for meaningful citizen engagement have suffered in post-amalgamation Toronto. Political participation, she argued, is fundamentally important in any assessment of democratic governance. Officials need to “seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision” and citizens should possess “the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.” Yet Flynn identified various “gaps in participation,” reporting a general dissatisfaction with the existing opportunities, particularly the operation of community councils. She noted, however, that Toronto has witnessed “other kinds of bodies spring up” in response. According to her research, the number of neighbourhood and business associations has “more than doubled” since the time of amalgamation, revealing significant demand for more participatory governance structures.

Lessons Learned from Amalgamation

Lesson 1: Amalgamation is not just about reconfiguring boundaries, it’s also about designing durable administrative structures.

There seemed to be broad agreement that key mistakes were made in the design and execution of Toronto’s amalgamation. During the mid-1990s, debates persisted over whether this type of restructuring was needed, yet less attention seemed to be paid to the nuts-and-bolts of how to design these new administrative structures. As Enid Slack and Richard Bird noted in their 2013 paper, “The task of integrating the operations and services of the seven municipalities following amalgamation was enormous.” The discussion helped illuminate some of the administrative challenges that the bureaucracy confronted in the early days of Toronto’s amalgamation.

Shirley Hoy outlined the key ingredients required for a smooth transition. First, there needs to be “clear purpose” with all actors “pulling in the same direction.” Second, “the core values of the enterprise” need to be identified early on, so
that “trust and respect can be formed among the key actors.” Third, the skills of the staff must align with the organizational demands. Finally, to ensure “alignment of purpose,” there is a need for “ongoing communications vertically and horizontally throughout the whole organization.” As Hoy pointed out, however, these ingredients were lacking during the transition phase in Toronto. She described the experience as a “hard lesson on how not to do [amalgamation].”

According to Hoy, one of the main problems from the very start was that there was “no clear purpose or alignment … no clear tone from the top in the first three years of amalgamation,” meaning that it was up to city staff to make key decisions. Hoy noted that it was never clear whether the amalgamated city would be permanent. Uncertainty over the future of Toronto’s governance structure meant that key actors were pulling in “different directions.” As she described it, there was an effort among these actors to preserve “what was in place pre-amalgamation.”

John Matheson also provided insights into the political factors that shaped the Province’s approach to the transition process. In 1996 and 1997, the Province invested a considerable amount of political capital into the amalgamation decision. When the issue was being debated in the provincial legislature, the government was accused by opponents of “trying to destroy local democracy” in Toronto. According to Matheson, this meant that when it came to implementation, the government did not want “to make those accusations come true.” The transition process was thus largely abandoned by the Province and left to the City’s new administration to oversee. This hands-off approach came at a cost. As Matheson suggested, it reduced the Province’s ability to “control how amalgamation would actually turn out,” including the potential to realize major cost savings.

**Lesson 2: The policy problems confronting municipalities are rarely confined to the boundaries that have been created.**

How should large cities approach metropolitan governance? Addressing this question requires municipal actors to balance regional considerations, including the provision of services such as transportation, while working to ensure a local focus on neighbourhoods, parks, streets, and communities. The panellists agreed that in the Metro era, the city did an effective job – particularly in the early years – of balancing these competing demands. As Enid Slack recalled, “Metro looked at the broader issues, the bigger items, while the local councils did the local work.”

Ultimately, however, Metro’s governance structures could not keep pace with the broader demographic and economic shifts taking place outside its boundaries. The pace and scope of growth across the GTA led some to question whether a new regional governance structure was required. According to Zack Taylor, this issue came up as early as the late 1960s. Yet rather than extending the city’s boundaries, the Province chose to create “mini-Metros,” or separate regional governments in Durham, Halton, Peel, and York. As Taylor put it, “a regional tier makes sense only if it is truly regional.” By the 1970s, Toronto and its surrounding areas had simply outgrown the institutional structures put in place just two decades earlier.

Problems with service coordination between Metro and the other regions in the GTA were flagged in the lead-up to the creation of the new city. Yet for reasons that remain unclear, the Province decided to retain Toronto’s existing boundaries, resisting calls to create new regional governance structures. As Slack and Bird concluded in their 2013 paper, “The problems currently facing the new City of Toronto are no less significant now than they were before the city was created; they have not been ameliorated by the creation of the new city.”

What role will regional governance play in Toronto’s future? Will the continued growth of the GTHA put greater pressure on Toronto to engage more formally with its neighbouring municipalities and regions? The panellists seemed to agree that while there is need for coordination across the GTHA, it is simply not politically viable. The Province essentially functions as the de facto regional government for the GTHA. The problem with this arrangement, Zack Taylor pointed out, is that the engagement of the Province varies; it is a role that is “alternately embraced and abandoned over the decades, depending on the party in power.”

A central theme throughout the panel discussion was the pervasive power of the Province in setting the direction of regional governance. Both Taylor and Matheson stressed that any effort to initiate any reorganization of regional governance across the GTHA would depend on the
willingness of the Province to do so. The chief issue, for Taylor, is that the municipal system “depends on the Province to make enlightened decisions,” but the Province is an unreliable actor “due to the political cross-pressures it faces.” In stressing the importance of capacity and leadership, Taylor and Matheson view the Province as the “pre-eminent actor in all of this,” but Matheson commented that any major change would come at a “significant political cost” for the Province.

The panellists suggested numerous ways in which policy coordination can be achieved, without necessarily creating new formal sets of institutions. Alexandra Flynn stated that beyond legislation from the Province, “there are lots of different ways to incorporate a regional voice.” Shirley Hoy shared this sentiment, advising against “another regional governance review.” For Hoy, the municipalities across the GTHA face “too many policy challenges at the moment.” In her view, the focus ought to be on “building effective partnerships” to address common challenges, such as responding to climate change.

One of the principal challenges of introducing large-scale institutional changes is that attention in the political system and public service is finite. As Hoy reminded the audience, “governance reviews and amalgamation take a lot of effort.” Those enthusiastic about reform need to be sensitive to existing demands that local governments face. The focus, Hoy reiterated, should be on how regional partners can fruitfully work together, “without necessarily calling it a particular type of governance structure.”

Flynn seemed to share this view, noting that there are more informal institutional options available for policy collaboration. She explained that the City and the surrounding GTHA are free to create “informal institutional structures” and that these can be explicitly designed to “advocate for the needs of the region” as a whole.

Lesson 3: Local governance is about much more than service delivery, it is also about promoting democratic responsiveness and civic inclusion within the community.

In the time leading up to Toronto’s amalgamation, there were genuine fears about a loss of contact between residents and local officials. Based on available evidence, these fears have largely been realized. Researchers who have studied the Toronto experience pre- and post-amalgamation conclude that the quality of civic engagement and democratic participation has declined. The chief problem seems to be that residents lack access to the democratic processes that they enjoyed in the Metro era. As Enid Slack summed it up, Toronto has simply become “too big to be locally responsive in the same way that the lower tiers had been in the past.”

According to the panellists, before amalgamation, the city provided many opportunities for civic participation. To some extent, community councils were designed to be an institutional solution at the time of amalgamation, offering residents access to decision makers and providing a forum for local concerns to be addressed. Yet according to Flynn, community councils have not addressed the core participatory gap left by amalgamation. Based on her analysis, these councils “don’t serve as representatives of the prior municipalities, beyond local planning and a laundry list of other issues.”

There was some discussion of how community councils might be reformed. According to Shirley Hoy, residential organizations across the city have called for “strengthening the powers of these councils.” In 2016, the City Hall Task Force urged Toronto City Council to delegate “further responsibility and decision-making authority to Community Councils.” Thus there seems to be an appetite for improving institutional access by both experts and stakeholders.

At the same time, there was agreement that processes of civic engagement need to be thoughtfully designed. As Zack Taylor suggested, the optimal time for involving the public in processes of local decision-making is never entirely clear. Alexandra Flynn echoed this notion, reminding the audience that involving people too early in the process can end up “undermining the coherence” of a specific policy decision. Yet for civic engagement to be meaningful, residents “cannot be consulted too late in the process.” In her view, Toronto can “serve as a model for inclusive governance” but “accessible governance takes work.”

One consequence of eliminating the old boundaries is that it has produced a less homogenous citizenry. Zack Taylor noted that in the new Toronto, the prospect for political conflict is much higher, with a much wider “range of conditions and preferences” across the city. The new city is characterized by “different groups” which occupy “different geographic spaces.” At the core of the division, Taylor argued,
is a fundamental “difference in lifestyle.” Something as simple as how one commutes to work – by car, by transit, on foot, or by bicycle – underscores much of this divide. As Figure 2 indicates, during the 2010 mayoral election, Rob Ford performed much better in areas that were “centered on the automobile,” while the reverse was the case for George Smitherman (see Figures 2 and 3). According to Taylor, the 2010 election results are a useful reminder that those living in the core and those in the surrounding suburbs “possess different policy preferences and have different orientations toward the city.”

This stark division between the old city of Toronto and the surrounding suburbs is made evident in Figure 3. In 2010, George Smitherman secured pluralities in polls located mostly in the old City of Toronto, while Rob Ford won pluralities everywhere else. According to Taylor, this reflects a broader historical pattern. Results from the 1997, 2000, 2006, and 2010 mayoral elections can be conceptualized as “clashes between identities and interests of the old city of Toronto and the pan-suburban coalition.” At the same time, his research suggests that “multiple electoral coalitions are possible in the new Toronto.” The 2014 election, and to a lesser extent that of 2003, was a reminder that contests can also be fought between the haves and have-nots across the city. As Taylor noted, the city is “increasingly segregated into different social and economic worlds,” where divisions are not just separated by the core-suburb distinction but also increasingly “between rich and poor, [between] native-born and visible minority neighbourhoods.” The challenge, Taylor argued, will be for the city to find mayoral candidates who are able to build “durable electoral coalitions that bridge these divides.”

Political divisions are evident not only in local elections, but also in other forms of political participation. While
business and neighbourhood associations have proliferated, Alexandra Flynn explained that these are “not evenly dispersed across the city.” Instead, such organizations tend to be located in places that represent affluent, white interests. For Flynn, this pattern speaks to a larger problem. Patterns of participation and mobilization will ultimately “determine who benefits from the decisions made by the city.”

**Conclusion**

Toronto’s experience with amalgamation appears decidedly mixed. On the one hand, there is limited evidence that streamlining the delivery of local services yielded major savings for the city. On the other hand, Toronto has demonstrated a capacity and willingness to innovate and experiment with different modes of democratic governance. The City has taken steps to improve transparency, democratic accountability, and to a lesser extent, inclusiveness. At the same time, the pressure to innovate might reflect a broader dissatisfaction with the quality of Toronto’s existing governing institutions.

The discussion revealed some of the trade-offs associated with amalgamation. First, the decision to limit the reorganization of Toronto to the old boundaries of Metro Toronto inhibited the city’s capacity to cope with regional-level pressures. Addressing issues such as economic development, land-use planning, and congestion will require the City to find innovative – and perhaps more informal – ways to better coordinate with its regional partners.

Second, recent electoral results and patterns of democratic engagement reveal a city that is socially, economically, and politically divided. Other cities looking to the Toronto experience should be mindful of the ways in which amalgamation has contributed to these divides. Restructuring the boundaries of local governance not only alters how services are delivered, but also can redefine...
how residents conceptualize their place within a political community.

Endnotes


3 For discussion, see Frisken, The Public Metropolis, p. 29.


6 Slack and Bird, Merging Municipalities, p. 17.


9 These regional governments were established by the Province between 1969 and 1974. York Region was created in 1971; Peel, Halton, and Durham regions were created in 1974.


11 Ibid., p. 321.


14 The Ontario government did follow one of the Who Does What Panel’s recommendations, creating the Greater Toronto Services Board (GTSB) in 1999. The GTSB, however, was given limited legislative power, restricted primarily to overseeing transportation-related governance in the GTA. When the Province took over responsibility for GO Transit in 2001, the GTSB was disbanded.


17 Since amalgamation, changes have been introduced that have increased the individual powers of the mayor and reduced the number of wards (from 58 to 45) and community councils (from 6 to 4). See André Côté, “The Maturing Metropolis: Governance in Toronto a Decade on from Amalgamation,” Research Paper, Toronto: Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance, 2009, pp. 9–10.


19 Slack and Bird, Merging Municipalities.


23 Local Services Alignment resulted in various responsibilities that had been previously shared with the province – including water, sewers, roads, transit, social housing, public health, and ambulance services – to be assumed by municipalities in the province. In return, the Province took responsibility for primary and secondary education. See Slack and Bird, Merging Municipalities.

24 Slack and Bird, Merging Municipalities, p. 25.

25 Ibid., p. 29.


29 Flynn and Spicer, Re-imagining Community Councils, p. 15.