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Giving power to the people

We can make Toronto more democratic by letting neighbourhoods make decisions that affect them

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Imagine. You, as an ordinary resident of Toronto, can meet with your neighbours to decide how tax dollars will be invested in your neighbourhood — or decide, after meeting with representatives of other neighbourhoods, that another area needs the money more. Imagine — government recognizes the knowledge and experience of ordinary people by allowing them to participate, on a day-to-day basis, in the planning and administration of civic affairs.

Imagine — a democracy that is more than choosing our lawmakers every three to four years.

A naive, impractical dream? These visions are reality in cities around the world.

From the inspirational example of the participatory budget in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to Guelph's Public Involvement Process an hour's drive from Toronto, to the Toronto Housing Corporation's participatory budgeting process for its 250,000 tenants, cities around the world are experimenting with richer forms of democratic participation.

What they're finding might surprise you.

People rise to the expectations their political system has of them. In Toronto, city-dwellers are patronized and asked to rouse from their political slumber every three years and vote for others to manage the affairs of the city.

Between elections, representatives are more accountable to their power base, mostly monied interests who enjoy special access to government, than they are to voters. Voter cynicism about politics follows naturally. Elites, as represented by the media, understand this as cynicism about who our leaders are and what decisions they make. To stem the erosion of confidence in our governments, they reason, we must find better leaders with better ideas.

This mistakes the causes of voter cynicism, and the ability of "good people" to overcome the corrupting dynamics of power built into our present system.

In the city of Porto Alegre, they've gone beyond tinkering with representative government. There, people are entitled to participate in neighbourhood assemblies where they decide the capital investment priorities for their neighbourhood, and then, by a series of conferences, for the city as a whole.

It's an effective way to allocate resources because it uses on-the-ground knowledge of needs.

People buy in because they feel ownership over the process: They have a chance for meaningful input and decision-making power. It promotes equity, because ordinary people tend to be fair when they see others have a greater need. It fosters engagement, because people see how their involvement changes outcomes. There is transparency because decisions are made fully in the public: It is hard to secretly bribe masses of people.

At the neighbourhood level, participation by poor residents is high. Even the World Bank likes it.

All of this is adjunct to the normal municipal administration, which votes on laws and decides the operational budget each year. There is still a mayor and a city council.

In fact, the vision of city politicians and the support of the city apparatus was the key to supporting and developing neighbourhood-level democracy in Porto Alegre — as it is in Guelph.

The Star's Carol Goar wrote recently of the flatness of vision among Toronto's mayoral candidates.

Participatory budgeting advocates have a vision of a city transformed by a new experience of democracy.

It won't happen in a day, but we will develop democracy skills only by practising them, first by a pilot in three to four wards, perhaps using community development money to start with; then moving, within three years, to a city-wide program involving a slice of the city's investment budget.

To get there, we'll need to begin with the following steps:

Error! Unknown switch argument. Toronto's budget — including both "hard" services like policing and snow removal, and "soft" services like community centres, must be broken down ward by ward. (There are political reasons why this is not done now — downtown Toronto fears the perimeter will balk at all the soft money it gets for social services, while downtowners will see how much money the 'burbs get for snow removal.)

Error! Unknown switch argument. New educational materials and staff support by City Hall to publicize

and facilitate the neighbourhood assemblies. City Hall would also be responsible for providing technical information on finance and law. Some good preliminary work has been done, like the community budget workbook (<http://www.toronto.ca/budget2003/budgetworkbook.htm>), but much more needs to be done.

Error! Unknown switch argument.Community development workers have to be involved in the planning of the process from the start. We will also need to start training people in how to lead collaborative decision-making processes at the community level.

Error! Unknown switch argument.A commitment of initial dollars to run a pilot program in three or four wards.

We have to move from a patronizing model of government from above, to one in which government helps urban communities to govern themselves, from below. Around the world, other cities are leading by example on how to do this.

Toronto City Council has already passed resolutions supporting the development of a participatory budgeting process. It's time for the mayoral candidates to meet the challenge of leadership on this issue, and commit to starting Toronto on the road to a new, better democracy.

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