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Public Policy in Canada: Bringing Place In?

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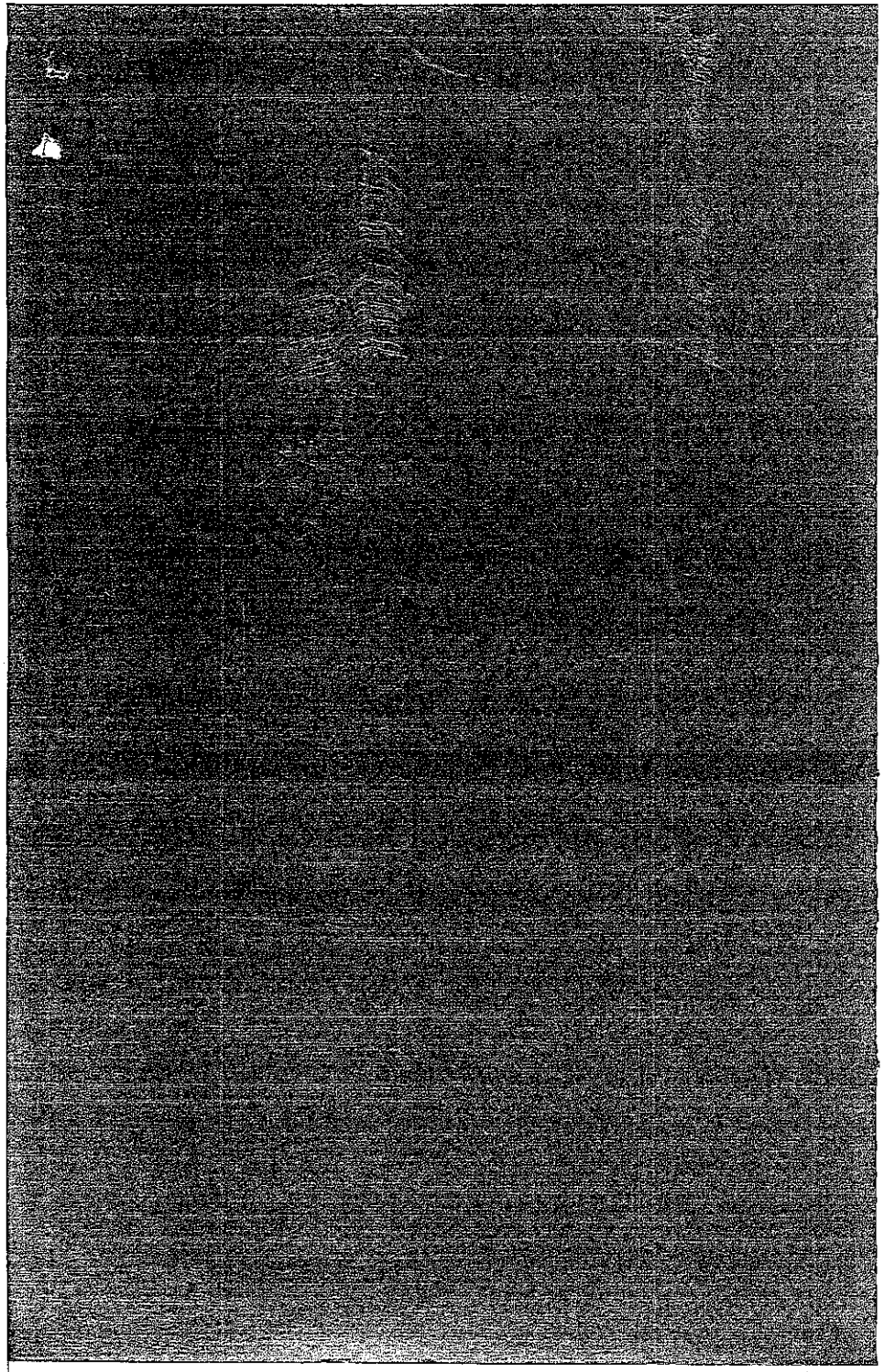

investing in better places:

international perspectives

The Smith Institute has long been an advocate of sustainable place-making, and our work in this field has helped to shape the public policy debate in the UK. This collection of essays takes our work forward by offering a global set of perspectives on the place-making agenda. As the monograph demonstrates, there is so much we can learn from each other. That process of mutual understanding is vital because it extends the potential and the appetite to create better, more sustainable, and more "people-friendly" places. We are delighted to play our part with the University of St Andrews in promoting international best practice and new thinking. All the contributions are of a very high standard, and all are informative and insightful. We are confident that the monograph will attract both national and international interest, not least among policy makers and practitioners. The Smith Institute will also be presenting the publication to politicians in London and Edinburgh, and circulating copies to a wide range of opinion formers and commentators.

The Smith Institute thanks Sharon Chisholm for editing this publication and offers its thanks to all the authors for their excellent contributions. We also gratefully acknowledge the support of the Centre for Housing Research at the University of St Andrews towards this publication and associated seminar.

Paul Hackett, Director of the Smith Institute

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Chapter 2

Public policy in Canada – bringing place in?

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Public policy in Canada – bringing place in?

In recent years there has been growing awareness that today's major public policy challenges play out in local spaces. As Meric Gertler aptly observes, "a central paradox of our age is that, as economic processes move increasingly to a global scale of operation, the centrality of the local is not diminished but is in fact enhanced".[1]

Geographers studying innovation in the knowledge-based economy now emphasise the importance of localised knowledge clusters for national economic success. Analysts of social inclusion and infrastructure planners encounter the multiple barriers faced by individuals and families living in distressed neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, rural areas and smaller centres confront another set of risks altogether, managing industrial change with few assets and declining populations. Common to all these perspectives is appreciation of how local territorial contexts – the geographic form and social nature of places – shape people's life chances.

For governments these dynamics frame a novel set of challenges. Their policy interventions must work from the ground up to generate solutions rooted in the concerns of local communities, attuned to the specific needs and capacities of residents. But what policy frameworks and institutional arrangements will enable such multi-level collaboration to happen? The conceptual and practical challenges remain daunting for national governments everywhere, as they rethink and retool for an era of more intensive global-local interaction.

The purpose of this article is to highlight innovations in policy thought and governing practices across OECD countries, and specifically, to bring Canada into the international conversation. It has been widely observed that Canada lacks a robust tradition of place-based policy making. Indeed, a recent high-level policy report to the prime minister concluded that "governments in Canada have lost their sense of place in policy-making" and that "Canada needs to catch up with other countries on the issue of place".[2]

In fact, Canada's comparative inattention to place-based thinking and approaches poses a series of intriguing questions. Why would Canada, a country with a vast geography of diverse spaces and unique local challenges, be a laggard in bringing place perspectives into national policy? What have been the costs in terms of

1 Gertler, M "Urban Economy and Society in Canada: Flows of People, Capital and Ideas" in *Isuma* 2 (3) (2001)
2 External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities *From Restless Communities to Resilient Places*, final report (Infrastructure Canada, 2006)

foregone opportunity or missed potential in Canada's failure to embrace place-sensitive frameworks? Is there evidence that governments in the Canadian federation are now bringing place in?

Taking up these questions, we offer both a retrospective interpretation of the spotty Canadian engagement with place-based policy, and a forward-looking vision of a different future. The presentation is organised in three parts. We begin by highlighting the place-based policy movement across the OECD, exploring the rationale and ideas informing the new governance paradigm. Next we bring the Canadian case into focus, surveying the historical and contemporary factors that have limited the impact of place-based policy, and identifying negative consequences for citizens, communities and governments alike. We close on a more optimistic note, describing recent policy initiatives that demonstrate a growing appreciation of how "place matters".

Putting place on the policy agenda

The "new localism" is a term that now resonates across a multidisciplinary literature analysing how globalisation's most important flows – of people, investment and ideas – intersect in cities around the world.[3] Three central claims are advanced. First, to deliver on major public policy outcomes such as economic innovation, social inclusion and ecological sustainability, national governments must engage local actor networks. Joining up is necessary because "wicked problems" – problems that are entrenched, interconnected and localised – require holistic interventions addressing multifaceted causality and capturing spillovers across sectors and governments. Second, features of the local milieu constitute "neighbourhood effects" that shape individual life chances "over and above non-spatial explanatory social categories such as gender and class, and specific disadvantages such as unemployment or ill health".[4] With both the origins of problems and the wellsprings of opportunity context-dependent, the new localism's third claim comes into focus: effective public policy merges the professional technical knowledge of governments with the tacit, experiential knowhow of residents living daily with the challenges, and street-level service providers organising opportunities.

Research substantiating these three claims has supplied the analytical foundation for design and delivery of place-based policies across the OECD. Particular implementation pathways have varied in accordance with national policy traditions and institutional frameworks. In the UK, for example, the project has been driven by central government, mandating and

3 Bradford, N *Place-based Public Policy: Towards a New Urban & Community Agenda for Canada*, CPRN research report F/51 (2005)
4 Atkinson, R and Kintrea, K "Disentangling Area Effects: Evidence from Deprived and Non-Deprived Neighbourhoods" in Urban Studies 38 (11) (2001), p2277

orchestrating a complex web of governance networks at neighbourhood and metropolitan scales. The US exemplifies an alternative strategy. There the push has come from below, as myriad community organisations and institutional intermediaries have long worked in inner cities.

Acknowledging such variation, the place-based policy movement coalesces around several key themes. The European Union's Barca report provides the best synthesis. "Place-based policy", it says, "is a long-term strategy aimed at tackling persistent underutilisation of potential and reducing persistent social exclusion in specific places".[5] The purpose is not to redistribute wealth from have to have-not regions, but rather to break inefficiencies and exclusion traps through provision of integrated policies that trigger institutional change by leveraging local assets.[6] The animating policy vision moves from government control to collaborative governance. Rather than acting alone or declaring jurisdictional ownership, governments work with one another and through civil society networks. Public policy resources and governing tools – recognition, authority and money – come together in customised packages responding to conditions on the ground and attuned to community needs and capacities.

Over the past two decades, these ideas underpin a growing cross-national policy consensus that place-based interventions can improve national productivity, expand opportunity and protect environments. At the same time, such interventions have not been viewed as a policy panacea. For example, despite a trend towards increased clustering of the poor in particular neighbourhoods, most at-risk individuals do not live in areas with a high proportion of disadvantaged people. It follows that universally available policies, such as for income security or healthcare, remain the indispensable foundation of well-being and prosperity. Place-based policies work best when they complement and enhance general policy and sectoral programming.

Most important is recognition of the synergy between these components: spatially targeted interventions are policy laboratories, generating fresh insights into how sectoral or universal policies work or do not work on the ground.[7] With appropriate feedback loops, the macro-level policy focus is spatially informed, suggesting where and how programme mandates and service rules ought to be amended. Designed and delivered in isolation from one another, however, neither place-based nor generally available policies (or sectoral programmes) will reach their full potential. An OECD report nicely summarises the dynamic:

5 Barca, F *An Agenda for a Reformed Cohesion Policy: A Place-based Approach to Meeting European Union Challenges & Expectations*, independent report prepared at the request of Danuta Hubner, Commissioner for Regional Policy (2009)
6 Ibid
7 Bradford, op cit

National policies are increasingly important, not only to provide better framework conditions for local initiatives, but also and especially to take better account of the many sectoral and macroeconomic policies which have a territorial impact.[8]

Canada and place-based policy: 'no there there'

The idea of "place" in Canadian politics and policy raises a conundrum. As countless studies of the national political culture reveal, Canadians exhibit a strong sense of place and local community in their attitudes and orientations to civic life. That such territorialised identities arise is hardly surprising in a vast continental country with a relatively small population that is both dispersed across thousands of hinterland rural communities and highly concentrated in some 20 city-regions scattered along the world's longest undefended border with the US. Canada's complex human geography contains much variation in the aspirations of local inhabitants from one type of place to another. Its highly differentiated physical geography, with a great range of ecological spaces, natural resources and built environments, has equally shaped distinctive local and regional "imaginaries".

While this diversity of local cultures and spatial identities has always acquired clear political expression in Canada, it has not translated into a coherent and strategic place-based policy tradition. Governments at all levels have never demonstrated clear understanding of the geography of innovation and inclusion, of how the quality of places – with their density and proximity – constitutes the foundation for national success, or, in turn, that leveraging local assets requires spatially sensitive upper-level policy.

While Canadian public policy has incubated several promising experiments, notably in the 1970s with federal programmes for neighbourhood improvement, waterfront revitalisation and affordable housing, these departures are not only exceptional but also of the one-off variety. Launched without the flanking policy and administrative supports to scale up the best practices, these initiatives remain a cycle of pilots and demonstrations. Charles Lindblom's classic description of "disjointed incrementalism" comes to mind, with its depiction of unplanned policy adjustments and marginal adaptations to the status quo uninformed by any larger, coherent vision.[9] In Canada, place has informed policy through politics in just such a disjointed fashion: investment flows territorially on narrow, short-term criteria related more to the pork barrel than to the policy argument.

8 OECD *Urban Renaissance: Glasgow: Lessons for Innovation & Implementation* (2002)
9 Lindblom, C "The Science of 'Muddling Through'" in *Public Administration Review* no 19 (1959)

How might we account for this disjuncture between localised community identities and a territorial political culture, on the one hand, and the relative absence of a robust place-based policy tradition, on the other hand? From the large literature that probes the nexus between Canadian politics and policy, five dynamics seem most germane:

Competitive and two-level federalism

Canadian federalism has long featured an intergovernmental ethos of "rights, order, and control".[10] The system runs on competition and conflict between federal and provincial governments (and often among provinces themselves) over resources, responsibilities, visibility and credit. Place-based policy has been lost in the scuffle. Without collaboration, the policy spillovers, programme synergies and sectoral externalities that all manifest themselves locally are not exploited. Moreover, the game is only two-level, as municipalities and community organisations have no seat at the table. Regrettably, most efforts to reform or rationalise intergovernmental relations seek to disentangle the players and revert back to watertight compartments. As Janice Stein summarises, in today's global-local age such a "neat division of powers and alignment of responsibilities" is the "wrong paradigm".[11] What is needed is "networked federalism" where intermingling and interconnections allow creativity to flourish.

National unity politics and one-size-fits-all policy

Federalism's seemingly endless competition expresses a larger national unity "grand bargain" that celebrates a "one-size-fits-all" logic of interprovincial equality, valuing uniformity more than particularity. National policy debates are often bounded by claims for reallocating money across territory, deflecting attention from a more focused and constructive question set: what distinguishes any given place, what constitutes its key assets, and how might policy optimally help it win the future? The ethos of equalisation, whatever its national unity merits, has meant that the spatial dimension of social welfare and regional development has not included criteria for community innovation or capacity building. In this case, place-based policy is lost in a polarised political debate about whether "locational investments" should be left to the discipline of the market or to the dependency-inducing hand of government.

Centralised government machinery

Canada's version of Westminster policy machinery centralises authority and

10 Gross Stein, J *Canada by Mondrian: Networked Federalism in an Era of Globalisation* (Conference Board of Canada, 2006)
11 Ibid

structures accountability vertically.[12] Both federal and provincial governments organise their affairs through strong departmentalism, whereby policy goals and programme outputs are internally defined without much reference to either their wider impacts or local connections. Top-down design and delivery lacks the "wiring diagrams" across departments and between governments that bring local actors together rather than push them apart.

The result is a national policy system that is sectorally strong but locally weak – producing housing but not necessarily strong neighbourhoods, or supporting firms but not necessarily knowledge clusters. Further, the vertical accountability of departmentalism nurtures risk aversion. Mandates to local actors are highly prescriptive; and micro-auditing constrains rather than enables problem solving. In recent years these tendencies have been amplified by sensationalist media stories of financial improprieties. Here, place-based policy is lost in mistrust: politicians campaign against policy innovation, and senior officials have few incentives to let go and work collaboratively with local partners.

No place policy focal point

Unlike countries such as the UK or the US, Canadian public policy has evolved without any powerful "whole of government" focal point for place-based policy thinking and action. There has been no pan-Canadian equivalent of the US Housing & Urban Development Department or the recent British combination of the Social Exclusion Unit and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Canadian macroeconomic and social policy has been dominated by finance and Treasury officials operating aspatial econometric models and income supports. Little analytical attention is paid to how local variation shapes the impact of such universal frameworks, or how local knowledge might usefully guide adaptations in subsequent policy rounds.[13]

Data gaps

Given the institutional-political history described in the above points, it is not surprising that Canadian decision making lacks a robust data set for place-based approaches. Official statistical agencies work at the census tract or census metropolitan area, scales that correspond with administrative structures but miss crucial spaces of functional interaction and community attachment such as the city region, intermunicipal rural region or urban neighbourhood. Further, the data gaps lead to weak evaluations because relevant baseline information is difficult to

12 Public Policy Forum *Collaborative Governance & Changing Federal Roles*, PPF and PRI outcomes report (2008)
13 Task Force on Modernising Income Security for Working-Age Adults *Time for a Fair Deal* (Toronto City Summit Alliance/St Christopher House, 2006)

gather and time-series analysis of impacts hard to conduct. While Canada has an internationally recognised national statistical agency, it has lacked the network of research institutions such as the British Joseph Rowntree Foundation or American Anne E. Casey Foundation that provide more targeted analysis and finegrained evaluation. Here place-based policy evolves in the shadows, with no systematic capacity either to learn key lessons or to feed them into the mainstream.

A summary of concerns

In sum, Canada's various policy legacies have not been conducive to place-based thinking and approaches. Recently, close observers have started to relate evidence of flagging policy performance to the absence of spatially aware governance.[14] The concerns cross major national goals:

Economic innovation

Canada's productivity record has been less than stellar for many years. A key obstacle is private-sector research and development, and especially the capacity to commercialise technical breakthroughs. At the same time, a growing body of Canadian research on "innovation systems" emphasises the critical importance of localised knowledge clusters that enable inter-firm learning, attract creative talent, and bridge laboratories and markets.[15] Canada's leading sectors would benefit from such clustering effects and from the place-based development policy that helps bring them about.

Socio-cultural inclusion

Canadian cities have historically not experienced the kind of spatially concentrated poverty evident in American and some European cities. However, in recent years a number of studies have reported a growing population of ethnic-minority groups living in the same poor neighbourhoods in Canada's largest cities.[16] Such concentrations represent a daunting challenge in Canada, as the country's future growth depends entirely on immigration. Effective integration of newcomers into Canadian housing and labour markets is a critical national priority, and equally one that can be met only through collaboration among the three levels of government and settlement service provider organisations on the front lines with the cultural awareness to bridge divides.

14 External Advisory Committee, op cit; Gertler, op cit

15 Wolfe, DA *21st Century Cities in Canada: The Geography of Innovation* (Conference Board of Canada, 2009)

16 Walks, RA and Bourne, LS "Ghettos in Canada's Cities? Racial Segregation, Ethnic Enclaves and Poverty Concentration in Canadian Urban Areas" in *Canadian Geographer* (50) 3 (2006)

Ecological sustainability

Canada has a patchwork quilt of activity in relation to sustainability. At the local level, there is an impressive range of grass-roots environmental stewardship ranging from urban ecological footprint networks to watershed alliances and greenbelt coalitions. At the provincial level, spatial land use plans are beginning to tackle sprawling growth and brownfield conversions. The federal government's record has wobbled from feeble implementation of Kyoto targets to leadership in selected areas such as ocean management and lake basins. The place-based framework would help integrate this diffuse activity, clarifying the optimal division of policy labour while specifying the respective contributions in tackling shared problems.

Civic engagement

Like other OECD democracies, Canada has experienced declining levels of civic engagement in public affairs. Voter turnout is slipping and opinion polls track a worrying cynicism about politics and policy. A broader benefit of place-based decision making is the explicit outreach to ordinary citizens, community organisations, municipal leaders and private businesses. Common to all these players is a direct interest in the places where they live and work, and substantive ideas about what might help and how. Such bottom-up dialogue is integral to the place-based approach, and while it is not easy to practice, it opens a non-partisan route beyond the "democratic deficit".

It is fair to conclude that Canadian policy making is at a moment of transition. Opportunities to move policy thought and action along a place-based trajectory are emerging. What are the possibilities for systemic change?

Moving forward: bringing place in?

Beginning in the late 1990s, Canadian governments, community organisations and foundations began to experiment with various initiatives aimed at better integrating sectoral and universal measures through place-based frameworks. The activity has been diffuse and partial in its roll-out, yet it is appropriate to take stock and ask whether these departures signal a broader form of policy innovation. Here comparative public policy researchers such as Peter A Hall propose that such policy transformations occur only when new ideas or concepts challenge conventional thinking in a way that shifts political interests and repurposes institutions.[17] To what extent is place-based policy acquiring resonance in the realm of Canadian policy ideas, interests and institutions?

17 Hall, PA *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism Across Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1989)

Ideas and data

Recently a spate of high-level policy reports have made the case for place in Canada.[18] At the federal level, the prime minister's External Advisory Committee on Cities & Communities offered a new vision of the federation, calling on all governments to adopt place-based approaches through a "double devolution" of authority and capacity from upper-level governments to municipalities and communities. Along the same lines, the Senate of Canada issued two reports on poverty reduction and population health that called for interesting blends of place-based and rights-based approaches.

At the provincial level, similar concepts are resonating. Explicitly drawing on British examples, the Ontario report on the roots of youth violence recommended a "neighbourhood capacity and empowerment focus" implemented through a neighbourhood strategic partnership headed by a Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion.[19]

In civil society, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy has worked for more than a decade on a pan-Canadian 16-city "Vibrant Communities" action-research project, testing the principles of place-based policy. Its findings have further empowered local community organisations such as the United Way to partner with municipalities on "comprehensive community initiatives" focused on marginalised neighbourhoods.

This work on ideas and concepts has been reinforced by breakthroughs in data at the relevant geographic scales.[20] Several examples are illustrative. At the national level, with the support of Statistics Canada, the Canadian Council on Social Development has pioneered a community social data strategy, making widely available poverty profiles and building local capacity to apply data. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities since 1999 has published quality-of-life reports across 23 cities and communities. Recently, these two data initiatives have combined efforts to produce "a functioning pan-Canadian network of planners and policy makers who share practices and build collective knowledge".[21]

At the provincial level, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador in 1999 introduced its Community Accounts, which provides data for 400 communities and is designed to show "how social and economic forces interact with natural resources and our environment to

18 External Advisory Committee, op cit; McMurtry, R and Curling, A *The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* (Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2008); Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science & Technology *In From the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing & Homelessness*, report of the subcommittee on cities chaired by Art Eggleton (2009)
19 Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science & Technology, op cit
20 Cook, D *Donec Prohibiti, Procidite: Building a Knowledge Infrastructure to Support Place-Based Policy* (Policy Research Initiative, 2010)
21 Ibid

determine our individual and collective well-being".[22] The Community Accounts has won international recognition for innovative knowledge management and evidence-based policy making.

Finally, it is important to note that university researchers have made their own contributions to shifting the terms of policy debate.[23] Economic geographers have mapped cluster synergies in the Canadian economy, and population health experts have identified neighbourhood effects in large cities. Scholars of intergovernmental relations have undertaken cross-national study of mechanisms and frameworks that enable place-based collaboration in federal settings.

In sum, Canada is building its own knowledge infrastructure for place-based policy. But as scholars of policy innovation emphasise, new ideas must connect with powerful interests if they are to be institutionalised.

Interests and institutions

In fact, the new thinking has influenced important policy actors. Most notably, in 2004, the federal Liberal government of Paul Martin announced an ambitious New Deal for Cities and Communities (NDCC). While somewhat amorphous in design, the NDCC, through a new departmental structure and activist minister, provided an overarching framework for advancing place-based thinking and approaches.

Federal action moved along several tracks simultaneously, all of them expanding intergovernmental relations beyond the traditional two-level game to include local voices. First, federal dollars were transferred to municipalities to address a longstanding "infrastructure deficit". The transfer mechanism embodied place-based principles, with federal monies conditional on local actors producing an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan.

Second, a host of pilot projects were launched in cities and communities, each featuring multi-level collaborative governance. Ranging from aboriginal economic development to homelessness and neighbourhood revitalisation, these action-research initiatives built local policy capacity and encouraged institutional experimentation. Third, the federal government invested heavily in knowledge outreach, supporting community-driven studies of topics such as urban social infrastructure and sustainable transportation. The

22 Hollet, A *The Newfoundland & Labrador System of Community Accounts'* (Government of Newfoundland & Labrador, 2008)
23 Dunn, J, Bradford, N, Evans, J *Place-Based Policy Approaches: Practical Lessons & Applications*, report submitted to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2010)

government's in-house think tank, the Policy Research Initiative, emerged as an intellectual focal point for this work.

The federal government has not been alone in its activism. There is growing evidence of provincial attention to place. Several provinces launched poverty-reduction strategies paying close attention to spatial dynamics and working with and through multisectoral local networks to attack the social, economic and physical dimensions of exclusion. Quebec has been an international leader in development of a holistic, place-based approach to the social economy, working through representative policy intermediaries at various geographic scales.[24] Most provinces also have implemented more locally sensitive spatial planning frameworks in the form of green-belt and smart-growth legislation that better integrate land use, economic growth and ecological protection.

Finally, at the municipal level, signs of change are also evident. In Toronto, for example, major public housing redevelopments are demonstrating a new sensitivity to neighbourhood vitality and community connections, working closely with residents through sophisticated grass-roots planning. In Calgary, the municipality partnered with business leaders and community foundations to tackle homelessness and develop a place-based approach to urban social inclusion.[25]

Thus, over the past decade new ideas and data have influenced Canadian policy communities at all levels of government to explore more place-sensitive strategies. Importantly, most of the momentum has been maintained across the federal government change from Liberal to Conservative power. Stephen Harper arrived in office as prime minister with a doctrine of "open federalism" that celebrated jurisdictional tidiness and watertight compartments. However, the practice has been more continuity than break with trends since the late 1990s. Key elements of the New Deal for Cities and Communities were made permanent, and the onset of the Great Recession found the Conservative government deeply involved at the community level in municipal infrastructure. New institutions have emerged conducive to place-based policy, including a federal development agency targeting Southern Ontario, and the formation of tri-level local immigration partnership councils mandated to integrate federal and provincial supports for newcomers at municipal and neighbourhood scales.

Conclusion

This article has explored Canada's engagement with place-based policy approaches. Observing the historical paucity of such strategies, a number of explanations have been

24 Mendell, M and Neamtan, N "The Social Economy in Quebec: Towards a New Political Economy" in Mook, L, Quarter, J and Ryan, S (eds) *Researching the Social Economy* (University of Toronto Press, 2010)
25 Maxwell, J *Strategies for Social Justice: Place, People & Policy* (Community Foundations of Canada, 2006)

only for the gaps and disjunctures. At the same time, recent dynamics have been described that portend a new era involving a quite robust spatial framework across major policy fields. It remains unclear whether these developments will produce a new policy paradigm. In a complex federation, each individual government initiative depends for its success on alignment with policies and programmes at other levels. Much rests with the quality of political leadership in institutionalising creativity in the realm of ideas and practice in a national policy framework. In a vast and diverse country such as Canada, place-based policy touches deep-seated values of autonomy, inclusion and community. There is a pan-Canadian coalition yet to be mobilised in support of this vision and these policies.