

THE CITIES: THE SEVENTIES

notes for a talk by Mayor David Crombie (check against delivery) at the Canadian Club, 12:30 p.m., Monday, February 5, 1973.

I'm here to talk to you today about a problem I think has been ignored for too long. In a way, it's a problem of discrimination, but on so large a scale that we've all just accepted it as the way things are.

I'm talking about the problem of our cities, the cities of Canada.

City dwellers are the only majority group I've seen who allow themselves to be so over-governed, so under-represented and so often ignored. And the oddest fact is that we are our worst enemy in this process of discrimination.

Most of us live in cities now---about eighty percent, I gather, and more are coming every day. By and large, we like living in our cities as individuals but a funny thing comes over us when we start thinking about cities as institutions and we allow our cities and their citizens to be treated less than fairly.

Somewhere in our national psyche we suspect and mistrust our cities. They are not a Good Thing. The country is a Good Thing. And I think I can trace the source of that feeling for you.

It goes back to the days of the settlers. They came to the new world---to escape the pressures, the problems, the industrialization and the corruption of Europe.

They came to seek frontiers, wide spaces, a fresh start in a vast new land and the uncomplicated rural landscape.

Those early instincts have been reflected in all the institutions that shaped this country and somehow left the city out of the mainstream of our national dreams and goals.

We were not alone in this imprinting process. In the United States, their revered Thomas Jefferson was hammering home the same point in 1800 when he wrote about a yellow fever epidemic:

"When great evils happen, I am in the habit of looking out for what good may arise from them as consolations to us...the yellow fever will discourage the growth of great cities in our nation, and I view great cities as pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man. True they nourish some of the elegant arts, but the useful ones can thrive elsewhere, and less perfection in the others, with more health, virtue and freedom, would be my choice."

When de Tocueville wrote his classic overview of North American life, Democracy in America, he said---in 1839:

"I look upon the size of certain American cities, and especially on the nature of their population, as a real danger which threatens the future security of the New World."

Was that nice?

But it wasn't just an isolated commentator who felt that the cities were a low priority in the growth of the New World. In Canada and to the South, it became our national policy to expand, to push West, to encourage agriculture and make the acquisition of large tracts of land easy and desirable.

So all through the early years, our cities drudged along---like Cinderella---providing ports, labour, industry and all the other housework of a nation---and receiving nothing for it but a few scraps and intensive scoldings.

Then as the cities started to grow in the years between 1890 and 1950, all the important framework was built for the way Canada governs itself---all the basic tax rules were set up, all the trade and transportation guidelines were set down and all the social legislation on health, education, housing, what have you, were engraved in stone tablets.

And during all that time, not a city in Canada was fairly represented at Queen's Park or Ottawa. So once again Cinderella stayed home and did the housework while everybody else went to the ball.

All this time, we've been conditioned to think if we only ignore the cities, they'll go away. We recognized that farmers have special problems so we gave them subsidies.

We admitted that labour had a case so we set up protective legislation.

And it was the same for every legitimate group with a special interest, be it a veteran or a businessman or a conservationist, could expect action from the other levels of government.

But not the cities. For the cities it was a case of no jam yesterday, certainly no jam today, and damn little chance of any jam tomorrow. We didn't have a federal department of Urban Affairs on the books until the Seventies.

Now I'm not saying we've entirely ignored the people who live in the cities. We haven't.

We've given some thought to their health, their housing and their education.

But we've never admitted that the city these people live in is the essential link between the people and their various governments.

The city is more than just a crowded crossroads.

The city is not just a dumping spot for lots of people.

The city is not a barracks for armies of poor and unemployed people.

The city is not a handy grid for highways going hither and yon.

The city is the place where people want to make an organic centre where they can improve the quality of their lives.

The city is the place where people want housing that reflects their needs and incomes, not some program of ticky-tack super-imposed from a high.

The city is the place where people want leisure and recreation and parks where they are most needed, not selected by deeree from some mandarin hundreds of miles away.

The city is the place where people want transport, yes, but with some say in stopping it from clogging streets, polluting the air, up-rooting families and destroying neighbourhoods. The city is the place where people put up with paying the costs of running the country but are increasingly unhappy about how little relationship there is between what they put up and what they get back.

And I think the city is the place where people want to see a new priority for cities in the policies of the other levels of government. We are much governed in cities but we are not much consulted.

Just as there was a time when agricultural policy was our prime priority; just as there was a time when railroads or labour or defence were our major concern; this is now the time when cities and the people who live there must become our prime national priority. Without the active involvement of the cities, all our programs in social legislation, our industrial ownership policies, our cultural and economic aspirations, our ways of dealing with the young and the old, our taxation and building reforms, simply cannot happen.

The other levels of government have started to realize, this implicitly; now is the time for us to go on record as wanting it spelled out explicitly. Cinderella wants to try on the glass slipper too.

We could start the concrete thinking on this shift in attitudes about our cities by examining a three-point program to solve the three major needs we have as cities:

1. We need to Reorder

the process by which so much more money flows out of our cities to the other levels of government than ever flows back in. The imbalance should be examined and corrected.

2. We need to Reform

the way in which money is channelled into the cities and get more autonomy in how the money is spent within the cities.

3. We need to Regenerate

other sources and resources of finances within our cities and this we can do when we get bloc funding, funds for neighbourhoods and seed money for projects which become self-supporting rather than a constant un-coordinated drain.

I've discussed some of these ideas informally with a couple of mayors of other large Canadian cities and I feel we see some common problems.

For this reason, I'm going to explore with the mayors of major Canadian cities their interest in joining me here this summer in conference to discuss our common goals---or differences as the case may be. If their reaction to the idea of this meeting is favourable, I think the results would be invaluable to all of us---not least the other levels of government, who would certainly be welcome as observers.

Someone said long ago, "man comes to the city to live; he stays to live well". If we are to live well, we must ensure that our cities stay alive and well too.