A tale of terrible cities

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July 21, 2007

URBAN MELTDOWN
Cities, Climate Change and Politics as Usual
By Clive Doucet
The Globe and Mail

An astonishing 80 per cent of the world's greenhouse gases come from activities in energy-hungry urban centres. Thus, the solutions to climate change reside with the world's cities. As city dwellers, we have the most to lose if we fail. The extreme weather caused by climate change threatens our urban "lifelines": transportation systems to move people and goods, communications systems, water, food and energy distribution, sewers and waste-removal systems.

Clive Doucet, an Ottawa municipal politician as well as a writer, is the author of Urban Meltdown: Cities, Climate Change and Politics as Usual, which deals with issues of air quality, climate change and the politics of urban sprawl and transportation. It's an interesting effort for a local politician. As a group, Canada's politicians are not popular; they break their promises, raise taxes while reducing services and all too often slide across the floor to embrace the party they condemned last week. Nevertheless, with the global climate crisis capturing headlines, the Canadian public is increasingly searching for signs of political leadership.

The fundamental question that Doucet poses is: Why is it that, nearly 50 years after Jane Jacobs wrote Death and Life of Great American Cities, followed by bookshelves loaded with intelligence on good urban form and the environmental crisis (A Short History of Progress, by Richard Wright, springs to mind), so very little progress has occurred? Why do we keep making the same mistakes in urban development over and over when we really should know better?

Our cities are sprawling out over the landscape faster than ever. Our street life is stunted as people and sidewalks are dwarfed in a wasteland of parking lots, roads and highways. Our air quality is declining. Our energy consumption and greenhouse gases are ever-increasing. Doucet's answer is at once both simple and complex: "Knowledge isn't the problem, it's politics."

People have been looking in the wrong place for answers. We do not have policies that will result in less destructive human environments, according to Doucet, because politicians are not willing to take leadership to make it happen. In spite of all the books and polls and media chatter about climate change and the importance of more sustainable human environments, it is "politics as usual" for city, national and international governments.

Doucet's book is a collection of stories - about cities and climate change, woven from the fabric of his real-life experience - not an academic treatise. He takes us on a wide-ranging journey that tours the reader through old Roman cities, 1960s student activism and the Stop Spadina movement, up to the present, with the World Social Forum in Brazil.

Doucet suggests we are heading down a path similar to one we took in the 1960s. Then, visionary leaders such as Martin Luther King, JFK and Rachel Carson ignited popular desire for new values and a better world. Only now, Doucet writes, signs of political leadership are coming from municipal leaders. Examples include the mayor of Seattle, who put together a coalition of more than 200 cities to enact Kyoto, in defiance of the Bush administration's refusal to join the international accord; the mayor of Hiroshima, who assembled an international coalition of mayors against nuclear weapons; and Canada's big-city mayors,

who are coalescing around demands for more spending on transit and other urban amenities long neglected by Ottawa.

Governments have utterly failed to curb the cancerous growth of sprawling cities, with their dependence on highways and roads, the largest single source of greenhouse gases. The burden of dealing with the consequences falls to local government, requiring Canadian municipalities to spend 25 to 50 per cent of their budgets on road construction and maintenance, sucking resources from longer-term community needs such as public transit, energy-efficient buildings, libraries and daycare.

Urban Meltdown argues that global consumer capitalism, which has empowered international corporations while enfeebling national and state governments, has also unexpectedly empowered cities. And therein, Doucet contends, is our best hope for a more sustainable future.

"The Roman empire, which lasted a millennium, was both conservative and conserving," he says. Roman urban form was characterized by low maintenance and low energy needs. While there is danger in comparing our modern society to the Roman Empire (after all, their labour force included slaves and prisoners of war), leaders of the Roman Empire, unlike their modern counterparts, were smart enough to realize that it pays to plan for the long term.

We have many simple long-term, low-tech urban solutions available today, including design that separates sidewalks, bike paths and transit from car lanes; complete communities where commercial districts are walking distance from residential areas; and buildings that conform to low-energy standards - to name just a few. Contrast this with the short-term "mega-cities that depend on a constant, carnivorous, planetary energy burn."

Many who saw Al Gore's film An Inconvenient Truth, or read such international climate-change bestsellers as Tim Flannery's The Weather Makers and George Monbiot's Heat have been pushed out of complacency about the extraordinary things that are happening to the Earth and the great potential for things to go terribly wrong. Urban Meltdown adds a new dimension, warning that our search for solutions is doomed unless we target both our cities and our politicians.

Will Canadian voters be persuaded by the faint green tinge of policies coming from our current political leaders, and reward them with comfortable, "business as usual" majority governments? Doucet warns we can no longer afford that luxury.

Eva Ligeti is the executive director of the Clean Air Partnership. She was Ontario's first environmental commissioner.