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Reality Bites

Halifax news, politics and snark, by Tim Bousquet

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The new ugliness in municipal politics

October 07, 2008 | 04:10 PM

I don't have a problem with heated debate--- candidates *should* try to differentiate themselves from their opponents, and if you can't stand the heat, you shouldn't be in politics. So I didn't find last night's back-and-forth between Sheila Fougere and Peter Kelly at all offensive. Good on both candidates for a spirited fight.

Nor was I particularly upset by the challenging questions raised by audience members--- that is, so far as Fougere and Kelly go.

But there was something else going on last night that disturbs me a lot: the politics of division that has come to Halifax.

Let me explain.

When Citizens for Halifax was started, I pointed out that it mostly consisted of those disappointed with the collapse of Halifax's Commonwealth Games bid--- business people associated with Fred MacGillivray (although MacGillivray himself maintains he has nothing to do with the org). Of course, people can form whatever political organizations they want, but Citizens for Halifax reached a new level of cynicism when they equated what was best for a handful of business interests with the fortunes of the entire city. It's discouraging that that effort was successful, at least for a while.

Citizens for Halifax, however, was just the preview of things to come. Next up came tax reform, which was broadly sold on the premise that people on the Halifax peninsula are paying too much in taxes and people in the suburbs too little. The reality of tax reform is more complicated--- actually, if it's implemented, there will be a tremendous shift in tax burden not only between urban and suburban areas but also *within* urban areas--- people in north end Halifax will pay more, people in south end Halifax less; people in north end Dartmouth will pay more, people in downtown Dartmouth less. Heck, even in rural areas, middle-class residents with more than \$40,000 in family income will see their modest homes taxed more, while those living down the street in multi-million dollar oceanside MacMansions will see their taxes slashed.

The other portion of tax reform revolves around the deed transfer tax--- "reformers" want to do away with it. Of course, the people who will benefit most from this are the people who buy, sell, and trade real estate for a living---that is, the very same economic elite who make up Citizens for Halifax. And where will the lost revenue be made up? That's right: by increasing property taxes eight percent for the rest of us.

Still, the backers have been very successful in selling tax reform as a peninsula vs suburbs issue. Random people, apartment dwellers even (whose taxes will mostly likely go up) believe that they are waging a war for "fairness" when they embrace tax reform, never mind the real numbers.

Last night we saw the crystallization of peninsula versus the world politics. Speaker after speaker challenged Peter Kelly, alleging that somehow the mayor personally is responsible for a lack of funding for downtown Halifax. Worse, Andrew Crystal, who as I understand the role of moderator was supposed to be somewhat neutral, added considerable commentary also taking Kelly to task for what he, Crystal, said was a lack of funding for downtown.

There was a lack of specifics in the charge--- Crystal said that downtown Windsor was the recipient of \$100 million funding from the Windsor city government over the same period that downtown Halifax received just \$2 million from HRM. But that number was apparently pulled out of Crystal's ass, as he referenced no source for his claim. Kelly, in a rare moment of lucidity, schooled Crystal on the truth: between Harbour Solutions and the five-year transit plan alone, nearly half a billion dollars has been directed at downtown Halifax. (Sure, a big chunk of that is federal money, but Kelly's point remains valid.)

A speaker from the floor likewise threw out a number-- just .7 of a percent of tax revenue generated by downtown Halifax goes back into downtown Halifax. But that number likewise seemed to come from nowhere, and to have no meaning. Hell, the portion of city hall salaries that is spent on morning coffee downtown is more than that.

My point isn't that we shouldn't take care of downtown Halifax---indeed, we should, as well as downtown Dartmouth. It's just that "taking care of downtown" gets defined in a very narrow way that benefits a very thin slice of elites who stand to make a lot of money from these expenditures, and not to the public generally, much less to the most needy.



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Big on the list of downtown expenditures sought by the crowd last night was a new convention centre and a new Metro Centre. Fred MacGillivray thanks the speakers, no doubt. With further examination, those projects may or may not have merit (I'm guessing: not), but notice that these big-ticket items with big construction budgets and big vendor possibilities, not to mention big salaries for the connected few, come before a lot of little things that benefit people at large.

Like what? Well, like funding for the race relations effort that Don Clairmont says is key to addressing Halifax violence. More, imagine if the effort that has been expended on arguing for a new Metro Centre was applied to addressing racial discrimination by downtown businesses and city hall. (Clairmont correctly points out that black people face employment discrimination at every turn in Halifax.) Or, imagine if the 250 people who showed up to fight for a convention centre instead showed up to argue for an apology to and compensation for the residents of Africville.

For starters.

Crystal repeatedly referred to the rural areas of HRM as "feeder communities" to downtown, a term he meant as an insult, but which has more meaning than he knows: if properly stewarded by government, the rural areas of HRM could in fact be the food source for the municipality. The Musquodobit Valley and even, yes, Westphal, can provide a tremendous amount of our food. We might study the success of the Intervale farm in Burlington, Vermont, to get an understanding of how a very large percentage of our food can come, cheaply, from within the municipality. The Seaport Market (another \$1 million spent downtown by the municipality, btw) is a good start, but by actually putting resources into rural areas, the return for all of us, urban and rural alike, could be substantial.

Moreover, politicians---and many downtown business people---are acting under the assumption that business can keep going as usual: we can foster a financial district, we can increase tourism dollars, if only we build enough tall buildings and enough sports stadiums to put them all in. But these people are blind, completely blind, to the world that is happening before our eyes: which includes a financial collapse, climate change and an energy crisis. Not 20 or 50 years from now, but now, today, as I type.

To respond to these crises, we'll need to rebuild the city, yes, compactly, but also distributed, with the suburbs becoming mini-urban cores, with transit links between the cores and a working farming complex around them.

I've repeatedly pointed out that all the new construction projects in the works will add a million square feet of office space to downtown. Kelly says he wants twice that, and those offices will be filled with 10,000 new workers. Seems like utter nonsense to me, but taking him on his word, those workers will reflect a population of worker families of something like 20- or 30,000 people. Figure three times that, at least, for all the people working in jobs servicing those people (day care and schools for their children, grocery and department stores, etc.) We haven't begun to build that kind of residential housing on the peninsula. Sure, there are visions of adding 50,000 people to the peninsula, but there's no escaping the reality of a huge commercial to residential imbalance.

Maybe, of course, the new high density downtown will become a reality. But all indications are that most of the new housing on the peninsula will simply be unaffordable for the typical office worker. They'll be living out in Dartmouth or Bedford, regardless.

In real terms, we're talking about 10,000 new commuters from suburban areas, and a large expansion of suburban population as those workers require services near their homes.

We have a choice: the suburbs can become even larger bedroom communities for workers in downtown Halifax, or they can be re-built as partial commercial centres themselves. But either way, *they matter*. Under either scenario, the suburbs require considerable financial commitments from the municipal government; otherwise we are shortchanging the workers of the future.

But see, that's not how the argument's being framed. Rather, it's a simplistic "downtown isn't getting enough," which by and large has been swallowed whole by the kind of urban chic youngsters who make up Fusion and show up at candidate forums berating Kelly for not spending enough downtown.

The frame, however, is a smokescreen for a class warfare among today's rich and connected against the worker of the future.

And while I have sympathy for Kelly's position, I'm not defending him: neither he nor Sheila Fougere has staked out a vision that's inclusive of all the residents of HRM, whether in urban, suburban or rural areas.

We're going to need rural farms and woodlots and suburban communities, as well as the urban core, as we face the financial, environmental and energy crises we're facing. We're all in this together, and the sooner the politicians start realizing that, the better. We've got to put an end to the politics of division.

Tim Bousquet

Rating: ★★★★★

Threads: Africville, city hall, Downtown, HRM election 2008, Mayor, Peter Kelly

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
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