

Canada needs a federal ministry of urban affairs

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The unveiling of the Trudeau cabinet a few weeks ago was met with much fanfare and for good reason. In addition to the historic commitment to gender equality, Prime Minister Trudeau demonstrated a willingness to put the right people in the right positions and signal some key policy direction with his choices.

Which leaves me wondering. What about cities?

In a country as vast as Canada, with so many wide open spaces and such beautiful countryside, it is sometimes hard to remember that more than 80 per cent of our population resides in urban areas. So where is the representation in cabinet?

From housing to transit to infrastructure, cities are the heart of Canadian growth, innovation and life, yet there is not a single representative around the cabinet table speaking on behalf of Canada's urban population.

It wasn't always this way, in fact, nearly 45 years ago another prime minister named Trudeau was the first to recognize that urban issues increasingly belonged at the centre of Canadian debate. In 1971, Pierre Trudeau created the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs, which for the first time brought the concerns of Canada's cities to the cabinet table. If urban affairs were significant enough to warrant attention in the 70s when the percentage of city dwellers was closer to 75 per cent surely four decades and a radical transformation of our economy later it is an even higher priority.

Cities are overwhelmingly where Canadians choose to live, work and play. They are where the vast majority of infrastructure dollars are spent, and where our economy's most significant innovation and growth will emerge in the future.

Unfortunately, the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs was disbanded in 1979, due partially to jurisdictional conflicts with the provinces. As cities are within provincial jurisdiction, managing them from a national perspective is tricky. However, much like healthcare, there is tremendous value to having a Canada-wide strategy and benchmarks in place to help the engines of our growth succeed.

The lack of a coordinated strategy for Canada's cities is putting us in a situation where some of the country's most critical issues are being discussed without a national vision. Housing affordability, social housing, infrastructure investment, transit, digital infrastructure are all issues that are crucial to the future growth of Canada yet are often left to underfunded cities that must seek one-time funding from the two senior levels of government.

Cabinet level recognition of urban affairs made a brief comeback under the Paul Martin government with the introduction of the Minister of State for Infrastructure and Communities, but died again once the Harper government came into power.

During the election campaign, the NDP proposed a return of urban affairs to cabinet, however the Liberals decided to go in a different direction. It's unfortunate, because although the Liberal government will feature many voices from urban centres across Canada, the behind-the-scenes depth and clout of a full cabinet portfolio would provide the kind of urgency this file requires.

It was encouraging to see the Liberals and Conservatives make infrastructure funding a priority during the federal election. The Liberals \$10 billion injection into infrastructure will provide Canada with the kind of kick start it needs to tackle the tremendous deficit in our cities as long as it is focussed on 'hard' infrastructure. Too often in the past, governments have financed 'soft' infrastructure projects such as community centres for purely political purposes. What we need now is investment in the 'moving parts' that make cities efficient such as sewer, water, and roadway capacity.

Such funding shouldn't be a one-off decision made to tackle a crisis, it should be an ongoing commitment. Addressing this disparity requires a coordinated effort on the part of the federal government along with the provinces with input from cities.

The new Liberal government is just getting started, and clearly it has many pressing priorities, but the lack of focus on urban issues combined with a commitment to invest \$10 billion in infrastructure is a real concern. If the interests of Canada's cities are a priority for Prime Minister Trudeau and his government, perhaps he should take a page from his father's playbook and bring urban issues back to the cabinet table. Only through federal leadership can Canadian cities continue to lead the world in quality of life, power our growth, and remain the envy of the world.

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