

MUNICIPALITIES WIN RESPECT IN FEDERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Gord Hume...October 2015...Municipal World

Cue the applause.

Congratulations to the many mayors across Canada who demanded municipal issues like infrastructure become part of the federal election campaign. Well done to the many city councillors who bravely stood up and pushed for their community to circulate questionnaires about the federal parties' positions on key municipal challenges, or talked with local candidates to help them understand the challenges faced by our cities and towns. Thank you to the CAOs, City Clerks and other administration officials who put together meetings with candidates and civic officials or hosted local debates with municipal questions as part of the public discussion. Good job to FCM and the other municipal associations and organizations who helped force some municipal issues onto the federal election agendas.

Obviously the most critical was the growing municipal infrastructure deficit. It was one of the six key issues in Calgary at the Globe & Mail's debate on the economy. The infrastructure problem received media coverage in many other ways during the long run-up to the election. The issues around public transit, social housing and other infrastructure needs were a topic of discussion from time to time on network television political talk shows.

The fact that this was such a crucial point in the election process was confirmed by the soon-to-be-released results of the national survey of municipal leaders done for "The Leadership Crisis", the new book on municipal and political leadership in Canada which will be published early next year.

One of the key questions in the national survey was, "What are the main priorities facing your municipality?" A stunning 87% ranked infrastructure the highest priority. Second was economic growth, and third was insufficient funding from other orders of government.

It's all about the money as far as municipalities are concerned. That will have to be addressed by the new federal government once Parliament convenes.

The efforts by municipal leaders across the country to respond to the challenges that came from many voices to push municipal issues onto the national stage were important. The fact that the Liberal Party committed to the largest infrastructure program in Canadian history, \$125 billion, was dramatic. The results of the election should be beneficial to Canada's municipalities.

The new federal government

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his campaign team saw the benefits of promoting a vigorous urban linkage as part of their national campaign. For Canada's towns and cities that had suffered from the lack of an urban agenda over the past decade, this should mean a new and improved working relationship with Ottawa.

Now come the implementation strategies and the development of a strong new working relationship between the Liberal government and Canada's municipalities. Not everything will be accomplished at once—that would be impossible. What is critical is for the new national government to send clear signals that it is committed to fresh partnerships with Canada's cities, and then the development of a timetable and funding formula to implement the promises for the enhanced infrastructure and other joint investments.

The end result can only be a stronger national economy and a more vigorous municipal sector that can better compete in the global economy.

The strong majority mandate of the Trudeau regime means the government will be relatively unfettered by Parliamentary games, particularly during the first year or two when the NDP and Conservative parties are going through their own internal restructurings. There are few reasons the federal government cannot implement its campaign promises, most notably the expanded infrastructure commitments.

The new government will have several experienced municipal politicians amongst its ranks to help move those commitments forward. Former Hamilton Mayor Bob Bratina, former Toronto Councillors Adam Vaughan and Judy Sgro, former West Vancouver Mayor Pamela Goldsmith-Jones and other MPs provide a strong municipal conduit into the Liberal caucus. Former Surrey, BC Mayor Dianne Watts and others will provide vigorous, experienced municipal voices on the Opposition benches.

Canada's new federal government will undoubtedly have some teething problems. Those will be forgivable. What would be unpardonable is for the federal government to delay or become shaky on its promises and commitments to municipalities. That is why Canada's towns and cities need to firmly but positively pursue a vigorous, respectful and cooperative approach to the new federal government. But make no mistake—the municipal agenda must be pressed forward.

Housing, transit, water and waste-water plants, and a wide variety of other local and important infrastructure investments are waiting for this new partnership. Of equal importance is the understanding from Mr. Trudeau's campaign comments that municipalities will have relatively unfettered control over local priorities and planning. Cities and towns are always best positioned to identify their key community needs.

A new relationship for cities

It is time for a new and lasting partnership between our cities and the federal government. Hopefully that will emerge with the Trudeau government and its new Cabinet and priorities.

We finally have started the national conversation about the infrastructure needs for municipalities during the election campaign. Next we need to widen and deepen that debate to include the other key elements of infrastructure renewal, from broadband service to rural and northern communities to quality of life investments that help attract and retain talent in bustling cities to help them compete in the global economy.

Then we need to talk more about the future of our cities and our nation.

We need to start that new conversation. Municipalities still need to make all of our new MPs understand the very real and complex problems that are facing our urban leaders. We need to press forward to encourage the growth and development of our communities in a fiscally responsible and sustainable manner.

We can't do that with the 8 cents our municipalities get from the tax dollar. We risk our future competitiveness in the ever-broadening global economy.

Other countries do get it. In the fall of 2015, new Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull appointed a Minister for Cities and the Built Environment. Turnbull prefaced the announcement by saying, "Liveable, vibrant cities are absolutely critical to our prosperity."

"It is where the bulk of our economic growth can be found. We often overlook the fact that liveable cities, efficient productive cities and the environment of cities are economic assets. Making sure that [...] our cities and indeed our regional centres are wonderful places to live is an absolute key priority of every level of government, because the most valuable capital in the world [...] today is human capital. We have to ensure for our prosperity, for our future, for our competitiveness, that every level of government works together constructively and creatively to ensure that our cities progress," he concluded.

Who will speak for cities and municipalities in Ottawa? Prime Minister Trudeau addressed that in his new Cabinet when he appointed former Edmonton city councillor Amarjeet Sohi as Canada's first-ever Minister of Infrastructure and Communities.

What is encouraging are the new attitudes and the very different approach to municipalities that have been showcased in the first days of the Trudeau era.

Municipalities won respect in the election campaign. Now municipalities must translate that respect into positive action.

Canadians clearly voted for change in the October election. Dramatic change. A different way of doing the nation's business. The time is now for Canada's cities to step forward boldly and with confidence to assume a more rightful place in Canada's governance structure.