

REINVENTING LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN CANADA: CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES FACING LEISURE PRACTITIONERS

Troy D. Glover, University of Waterloo

Introduction

Canadian local governments have undergone several dynamic changes during the course of the 1990s. As agents of the provincial governments, municipalities have been forced to endure greater demand for social services despite receiving fewer transfer payments and inheriting greater responsibilities through provincial downloading. In response, municipalities have attempted to maintain the quality of public services by applying business-like principles to government (Borins, 1995), adopting market mechanisms (Walsh, 1995), and utilizing alternative service delivery (Glover & Burton, 1998). These strategies have been championed by proponents of the "New Right" (Pierson, 1991), public choice (Self, 1993), and the new public management (Borins, 1995) all of whom advocate reduced government intervention into the workings of the market economy.

In 1992, these ideas culminated into a tremendously influential book entitled *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector* by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler. The book identifies several strategies for altering government into an efficient business enterprise. Surprisingly, however, despite its vast appeal across North America, and more significantly, its pervasive influence, few leisure researchers have acknowledged the book and its implications for public leisure services delivery. Moreover, the book has received absolutely no praise or criticism from Canadian leisure researchers, perhaps because it was written for an American audience. Nevertheless, the book's influence has transcended U.S. boundaries and arisen in Canada in the form of the *Getting Government Right* initiative at the federal level under the Liberal government. Subsequent undertakings have also ensued at the provincial level, particularly in Ontario under the Harris government, and in Alberta under the Klein government. Unquestionably, such policies have affected leisure service delivery, particularly at the local level. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to summarize the ideas in *Reinventing Government* and to introduce the challenges that they present to local (municipal) leisure practitioners. In particular, the paper will focus on the Reinventing Government Movement and its implications for (1) public leisure services, (2) the providers of public leisure services, (3) the participants, and (4) the concept of leisure.

The Tenets of Reinventing Government

In *Reinventing Government*, Osborne and Gaebler (1992) persuade the public and its political representatives to support the complete overhaul of the public sector. The authors describe the inherent flaws in government and offer possible "solutions" for its improvement. In short, they posit that a "civilized society cannot function effectively without *effective* government" (p. xviii). Presumably, the term *effective* belongs to a government with certain characteristics. That is, first, an effective government is *entrepreneurial* such that it habitually uses its resources in new ways to strengthen its efficiency. Second, an effective government *enables service delivery* by arranging services without necessarily producing them. Third, effective government is *competitive* because it allows public sector managers to "shop around" for the most effective and efficient service producers by pitting commercial, not-for-profit, and public suppliers against one another. Fourth, effective government is *customer-driven* because it gives its customers more choice and forces itself to be more accountable to its citizens. Finally, effective government is *mission-driven* because it develops budget systems and rules that free its employees to pursue its goals and objectives. In sum, the tenets of *Reinventing Government* encourage the adoption of business-like practices in the public sector and champion the primacy of efficiency.

The Challenges and Issues of Reinventing Government

Several contemporary challenges have arisen with the ascendance of the Reinventing Government Movement. In the context of public leisure provision, there are particular issues which must be addressed by leisure practitioners if informed decisions are to be made. The following section identifies such challenges and briefly describes the positions of both adversaries and proponents of *Reinventing Government*.

Public Leisure Service Delivery: Business or Public Administration?

Osborne and Gaebler propose several changes to government that involve adopting management practices from the commercial sector. Their rationale is that commercial sector approaches are presumably superior to traditional public administration. The difference between the two is that, ostensibly, the former is "derived from commercial operations and is meant to bring about a new mind set, a new vocabulary and a proliferation of management techniques [to the public sector]" (Savoie, 1995, p. 113). Several proponents of public administration, however, view the public and commercial sectors as distinct entities that cannot be compared. As Savoie (1995) explains, "we still need to remind people that the public sector is not the private sector" (p. 114). Indeed, there are obvious differences that characterize both the public and commercial sectors, respectively, which make them incompatible. As such, leisure practitioners face the challenge of determining in which situations commercial sector practices are applicable, if they are indeed applicable at all.

Public Leisure Service Agencies: Producers or Arrangers?

Traditionally, government has adopted a model of self-sufficiency whereby it has been the exclusive arranger *and* producer of public services. Scarce financial resources, however, have increasingly pressured municipal government to "do more with less" or to "do less with less." As a result, Tindal and Tindal (1990) suggest that municipalities should determine "what business they are in" (p. 263). They contend it is no longer feasible for government to deliver directly such a wide array of services on its own. As such, the state has increasingly chosen to arrange services as opposed to produce them. Advocates of direct provision oppose such a strategy because they mistrust the motivations of non-governmental organizations, particularly commercial agencies, willing to produce public services for the state. Under this premise, government as a direct provider is believed to rectify the imperfections of the market. Therefore, the decision to enable service delivery, introduces the challenge of determining in what situations, if at all, leisure practitioners should produce leisure services directly, or arrange them by contracting other producers to do so.

Public Leisure Participants: Citizens or Customers?

The Reinventing Government Movement supports the customer model of the citizen-government relationship whereby participants are viewed as consumers of government services (Smith & Huntsman, 1997). As Osborne and Gaebler put it, government must put customers "in the driver's seat" (p. 180). Smith and Huntsman (1997) contend, however, that the self-interest implicit in the customer model may be detrimental to the concept of community because participants are encouraged to be self-serving and to put their needs ahead of the community. Moreover, the participants have little involvement in the delivery of public leisure services, other than as users, and they react and respond passively to the services rendered. In essence, government drives and directs the relationship between the participants and itself. As such, government is active, whereas participants are passive. Like a business, government attempts to sell its citizens as much as possible while maintaining an arm's length relationship which is controlled by the forces of supply and demand. Mintzberg (1996) scorns the use of such an approach in the public sector.

"I am not a mere customer of my government," he writes, "I expect something more than arm's length trading and something less than the encouragement to consume" (p. 77). To reduce the role of government to that of a purveyor of public services is to fail to appreciate its role in fostering citizenship. Moreover, "to recast citizens as customers is to accede to the notion that government is no longer accepted as 'we,' but 'they'" (Fox, 1996, p. 260). Given this perspective, leisure practitioners are faced with the challenge of treating their participants appropriately without denying rights of social citizenship or failing to meet customer expectations.

Conceptualizing Leisure: Consumption or Emancipation?

By subjecting public services to the market, local government resigns to the notion that its services are commodities. In the context of leisure, public leisure services are viewed as goods that can be bought and sold in such a manner that leisure participation becomes a form of consumption. Many leisure researchers oppose such a conceptualization of leisure. For instance, Reid and van Dreunen (1996) believe "leisure, when defined as a transforming mechanism, provides the forum which encourages people to redefine themselves and their community through the creation of activity which focuses on ameliorating a negative individual or social condition through self-development or community betterment" (p. 48). Leisure services occupy an ambiguous position, however, between social welfare and the market, and between individual and collective consumption (Coalter, 1998). As such, leisure practitioners are faced with the challenge of "not choosing whether to abolish pleasure or to embrace it, but to find mechanisms that might help release the individual from the conformity of corporatism" (Saul, 1994, p. 171).

Conclusion

In sum, there appear to be several issues and challenges that have surfaced with the emergence of the Reinventing Government Movement. As a result, it is necessary for leisure researchers and leisure practitioners alike to, first, understand the tenets of *Reinventing Government*, and, second, to recognize the challenges they present. Equitable, effective, and efficient Canadian public leisure services depend upon and, more importantly, demand careful consideration of the issues that *Reinventing Government* introduces.

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Contact Information: Troy Glover, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, N2L 3G1. E-mail: tdglover@healthy.uwaterloo.ca Phone: (519) 885-1211 Fax: (519)746-6776



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