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What I Would Change About Mayors in Canada

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Leading up to Canada Day, the Huffington Post blog team asked prominent Canadians what they would change about one aspect of our country. We are publishing their answers in our series "What I'd Change About Canada" leading up to July 1.

If I could change one thing in Canada, I would grant its cities -- and its mayors -- much more power than they than they now enjoy.

While most like to think of Canada -- especially on Canada Day -- as a land of wide-open spaces and great forests, clear lakes and streams, and of course cottage country, the reality is that Canada is an urban nation. Eighty percent of its population live in two per cent of its land area. And Canada's five biggest metro regions produce about 50 per cent of its economic output. Toronto, where I live, alone generates about 18 per cent of Canada's GDP.

Though this might have a counter-intuitive ring in the light of the recent scandals plaguing Toronto's and Montreal's city halls, Canada's mayors -- the people who are directly responsible for Canada's cities and the most accountable to their citizens -- should have the power to make decisions about local needs and infrastructure, and the ability to raise the money they need to carry out their plans.

As the Maytree Foundation's Alan Broadbent has said in his book [Urban Nation](#), and more recently at the [July, 2012 Vancouver Forum](#):

"Cities have been left with constitutional arrangements, with insufficient powers, with little fiscal resilience, and with weak governance structures...They rely on the kindness of strangers. But very often these strangers....are the other two levels of government [and] the provinces and the federal government... have different agendas and they have different priorities and they have different pressures. And this really leaves cities in the state that they have no real control over

their destinies...The new deal for cities has to not be about handouts, but about taking some control of our destiny and some responsibility for it... If not, Canada will continue to pay a high price for having governmental arrangements that are so comprehensively out of step with our future challenges."

The American political scientist Benjamin Barber points to the need to realign the way we govern our cities, provinces, states and nations in his aptly titled new book, [If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities](#). He points out that while nation states have become anachronistic and dysfunctional, cities and mayors are where the real action is.

For all the efforts that Calgary's Naheed Nenshi have made, he has far less power than any of his U.S counterparts. This lack of power and authority might seem like a blessing when it comes to incompetent hacks like Toronto's Rob Ford, Montreal's Michael Applebaum, or London's Joe Fontana, but it actually helps explain why Canada must settle for their ilk while U.S. cities routinely elect national figures of the caliber of Michael Bloomberg, Rahm Emanuel, Cory Booker, and Martin O'Malley.

Canada is as urbanized a country as any in the world, but its cities are the proverbial dog, wagged by a governance system from the 19th and 20th century. It is time to change.

Reform of this kind is daunting, but it can be done. London, to take just one example, established its Office of the Mayor in the year 2000 and has since had two very successful mayors from opposite ends of the political spectrum, Ken Livingstone from the left and Boris Johnson from the right. [The Guardian](#) jested that the office has become so successful that it is leaving the rest of England behind.

The great nodes of the 21st century economy, the loci of talent, innovation, productivity, and wealth, are cities. Before Canada can become a truly global player it needs world-class mayors -- and it won't attract them until its cities are fully-empowered.

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