

## **Why Dundas Matters**

by Theodore Plantinga

Dundas is a historic town in southern Ontario in which I have made my home for the past eighteen years. With a population of only 21,000, it is not known from coast to coast. Yet it boasts enough history to merit some special recognition. Just recently, the town celebrated its 150th anniversary; this fact alone makes it historic in North American terms. One of the main east-west streets in Toronto, some 40 miles to the east, is named after Dundas: in the old days, it was the street one would take if heading to Dundas from Toronto. One also finds such a street in London, a sizable city some seventy miles to our west. Dundas residents take pride in finding such reminders of their history in other parts of the province.

Sad to say, it appears that the history of Dundas is coming to a close, in a mere matter of months. What will happen is not that the streets and buildings that make up the town will pop out of existence but that Dundas will be absorbed into its larger neighbor, Hamilton. At the beginning of our town's history, Hamilton was a completely separate town a short journey to the east. Over the years, the two towns expanded and grew together, so that Hamilton's public bus system (quaintly called the Hamilton Street Railway) extended into Dundas. Thus Dundas has long been regarded as part of the Hamilton urban area. But it remained a separate town, with its own municipal government and a strong sense of identity.

Back in the 1970s there was an effort to amalgamate Hamilton and Dundas, but it was strongly opposed and it failed. In the late 1990s the idea of making Hamilton into a "supercity" was revived. At that point in time, a Progressive Conservative government under the leadership of Mike Harris ruled Ontario. When campaigning for office, the Harris Conservatives professed to embrace small-town values and democracy on the local level, but they seemed to change their mind once they were in power. They pushed through a major municipal amalgamation for Toronto, which led to a lot of controversy and hard feeling. What was good for Toronto would presumably be good for Hamilton as well -- or so the planners in our province's capital thought.

American readers of this piece should be informed that a provincial government in Canada has rather substantial powers in relation to municipal affairs. Here in Ontario the municipalities are, so to speak, creatures of the province. Of course it is generally thought that it would be unwise to override the sentiments of the local folks. When the amalgamation plan was proposed, some of the municipalities slated to be swallowed up organized local referenda to give the citizenry a chance to express themselves. In the areas to the west of Hamilton, namely, Ancaster, Dundas and Flamborough, the vote went overwhelmingly against the amalgamation plan. Here in Dundas we voted 95% against union with Hamilton. But the referendum was non-binding. Adding to the political mix was the role of the local member of the Provincial Parliament, Tony Skarica, who was a member of the ruling Progressive Conservative party. Mr. Skarica boldly took issue with his own government and played a major role in stopping the amalgamation plan. Dundas was saved, and Mr. Skarica was hailed as a hero!

When 1999 rolled around, it was time for the Harris government, which had been elected in 1995, to face the voters again. The popular Mr. Skarica was again the Progressive Conservative candidate in our constituency, and he won with a very impressive margin. Part of his platform was that there would be no merger with Hamilton as long as he was our representative in the Provincial Parliament. And this promise was not something he tossed off lightly; he based it on assurances from on high.

After the election, in which the Harris Conservatives again won a majority, Mr. Skarica was in for a nasty surprise, for the plan for union with Hamilton was quickly resurrected. Again a great controversy ensued, but the government had a majority and could push its agenda through despite the opposition of Mr. Skarica, who was joined by another Hamilton-area representative who was also a member of the Progressive Conservative party. Once the die was cast, Mr. Skarica surprised even some of his own supporters and showed that he was a man of his word: he resigned his seat in the Provincial Parliament! At this point, while the details of the merger are being worked out, we are without representation.

The purpose of this little essay is not just to utter a lament but to explain -- especially to people a bit farther away -- why the union has provoked such strong opposition among us. What is at stake in our town is not just some local interests. Thus an account must be given of *why Dundas matters*, and why its passing from the political scene deserves to be lamented.

Part of the answer was offered by our federal Member of Parliament, John Bryden, who is affiliated with the Liberal Party. While he had no direct say in what transpired in the provincial legislature, he did watch the unfolding events with interest and argued publicly against the plan.

Mr. Bryden made much of the fact that the bill abolishing Dundas and some other local municipalities was named the "Fewer Municipal Politicians Act." The government's reasoning, presumably, was that since the people are thought to hate politicians, they would relish the prospect of there being fewer of them. But Mr. Bryden asked what the alternative to having elected politicians is. The answer, quite simply, is that a greater proportion of the decisions that affect our everyday lives would then be made by *unelected* government officials. He then asked: who is likely to be more responsive to the public will -- *elected* officials, who have to face the voters at regular intervals, or *appointed* officials?

In effect, the "Fewer Municipal Politicians Act" is a step away from democracy. I suppose if we really wanted to cut down on politicians we could go over to a dictatorship. Then there would be no electioneering whatsoever, and I imagine the government officials would be even more imperious than they sometimes seem to be when serving under the supervision of elected representatives.

In the background of much political grumbling in this country in recent years is the term "globalization." This term has not been used much in the battle over Dundas, but it deserves to be. It also needs some analysis. More specially, two components in this term's meaning require some commentary.

First of all, for those who love the notion of a "worldview," globalization has a comforting and even familiar ring. Is it not commendable to keep the concerns of the *entire* world in mind as we make decisions? Is there not something to be said for the old adage that we should think *globally* and act *locally*? Indeed there is.

The defenders of globalization like to argue that faraway forces, powers and interests should be allowed some say on issues right in our own neighborhood. Thus to cede some control of Dundas issues to politicians in Hamilton and other nearby towns is definitely to take a step in the direction of globalization.

Where might such a line of argument lead? Could we not go further? Since the Hamilton urban area and greater Toronto have more or less merged in the sense that the north shore of Lake Ontario is virtually continuous urban sprawl from the one to the other, why shouldn't Hamilton in turn be swallowed up in a still

more colossal "supercity" of Toronto? Wouldn't such a plan leave us with *still fewer* municipal politicians and also constitute a further step toward the alleged virtues of globalization?

I would rather go in precisely the *opposite* direction and admit that some of our units of government are *already* too big for their own good. More specifically, I am convinced that although Prince Edward Island is a bit too small to function well as a province, Ontario is definitely *too big*. Some of the inadequacy in government we have suffered in this province is the result of sheer size: too much territory and too many people under one government. Those who make the decisions do not have enough opportunity to acquaint themselves properly with *local* situations and issues. Therefore, when it is proposed that Ontario be broken up into two (or perhaps even more) separate provinces, I am perfectly willing to consider the proposition seriously.

There are some Canadians who would like to see Canada absorbed into the USA (a prospect which some regard as the logical culmination of the free trade agreement ushered in by the Mulroney government). People of this "pro-American" persuasion also need to consider the logic I outlined above. The USA as a political entity (I am thinking here in terms of matters for which the federal government is responsible) is already large and unwieldy. If people in Alberta now find that *Ottawa* is far away and often seems unresponsive to their needs, they should ask themselves how much clout they would have in a still bigger political union in which they had to make their case in *Washington* instead.

The drive toward ever larger units of government is in effect a move away from politics in the healthy sense of the term, i.e. politics as public discussion of issues in which the people get a chance to be heard. Many of the people, sad to say, are all too willing to let go of politics in this sense. They seem to have little interest in issues.

Throughout most of my adult life, I have been hearing reports that the US national news broadcasts by the major networks need to be expanded to an hour. Often those reports are accompanied by a prediction that it will happen soon. But it never does. We are told that a half hour is inadequate to cover all that needs to be presented. I am inclined to agree. Even so, the expansion does not take place.

And when you do tune in on those (presumably all-too-brief) half-hour news broadcasts, what do you find? All sorts of attention to celebrity news, with certain politicians being counted as part of the celebrity class. There is also a

good deal of reporting on health issues, although very little of it counts as news in the strict sense of that which has just happened. One gets the impression, in short, that the networks have a lot of trouble filling up a half hour (or 22 minutes, once commercials are eliminated). And so political news becomes personality-oriented, and much political reporting focuses on "scandals." More specifically, political reporting tends to make a priority of discussing those political personalities who are "interesting" because they are scandal-prone, such as President Bill Clinton, who will surely be missed by the media when he is out of office. We are already hearing complaints that Al Gore would make a dull president and would not generate scandals at his predecessor's rate. Would people still watch the news if Mr. Gore became president?

In response to all the developments outlined above, I believe we should oppose the globalization slogan and continue to insist that an important part of government and politics is attention to *local* issues and the unique circumstances in which they are embedded. In this regard we definitely do *not* need "fewer municipal politicians." Mr. Bryden is right!

The second element of meaning in the term globalization that requires our attention when we consider Dundas is a subtle endorsement of non-local economic powers -- more specifically, economic powers which are *global* in the sense of multi-national and therefore not entirely subject to the laws of any one country or to its national government. The general idea, here, is that *economic* considerations do -- and *should* -- dictate *political* decisions nowadays, and that the economic forces that seem to call the shots transcend political boundaries.

The general idea is that because of globalization, we need to be open to influence from outside our immediate territory. Since our prosperity (or so we are told) somehow flows from the activities of these multi-national corporations (and not from local, small-scale entrepreneurs, who are now increasingly thought to be redundant), we must govern ourselves in such a way as to stay in tune with the real movers and shakers of our age, namely, the leaders of business, who are also getting more and more media attention because of all the power they hold. To embrace globalization is to have made one's peace with the idea that the profit motive underlies most major decisions in our society nowadays; open embrace of community ideals and of the "common good" seems quaint, a throwback to a naive era that will never return.

Isn't there something ironic about these developments? Consider this. Now that communism has been overthrown in much of the world and has been thoroughly discredited, some of Karl Marx's biting comments on leaders of

industry and finance are starting to look far-sighted again. But Marx still fails in the end because the workers do *not* rebel (as they are supposed to, according to his theories) but gradually take up the globalization mantra too, and console themselves that at least *their* stocks and mutual funds and pension funds are doing well in the globalized world economy.

Is it globalization, then, that is swallowing up Dundas? That would be too simple an analysis. And I do not mean to suggest that each and every proposal to merge or join two or more separate towns must be resisted. Local situations cannot all be dealt with in terms of a universal formula, as though we could say "one size fits all."

But the disappearance of Dundas as a political entity does seem to me an exceedingly sad sign of the times, a sign of the willingness of many people to go along with globalized "politics," to allow democracy to wither, to turn more and more decisions over to unelected officials, and to take refuge in the lame excuse that everything is controlled by the big corporations nowadays, which are beyond the reach of the law and hardly even have to pay taxes.

Such attitudes, indeed, are lamentable. And when the prevalence of such attitudes allows a wonderful historic community like Dundas to disappear from the political map, tears will be shed.