



## **The politics of municipal mergers (and demergers) in Montreal**

**Richard Harris**

**Reviewed:** Peter Trent. 2012. *The Merger Delusion. How Swallowing its Suburbs Made an Even Bigger Mess of Montreal*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen’s University Press.

*In the late 1990s, the province of Quebec reacted to metropolitan growth in Montreal by merging the city with 27 of its suburbs, provoking a major debate and, ultimately, a number of demergers. An account written by one of the leading opponents to amalgamation (and ex-mayor of one of the demerged suburbs) discusses the experience and the issues at stake, providing a timely counterpoint to the French debate on “Greater Paris”.*

Detailed accounts of municipal amalgamation can be exciting. Who knew? The engrossing story that Peter Trent tells in *The Merger Delusion* of the amalgamation, and partial de-amalgamation, of the city of Montreal (1999–2006) is not dispassionately academic. Nonetheless – or perhaps for that very reason – it should be read by anyone who has a serious interest in Quebec politics or in urban affairs, within Canada or indeed beyond.

The broad issues at stake: as cities expand, they spread beyond municipal limits. The governance of these expanded urban areas can be handled in one or more of three ways: a proliferation of suburban governments; the creation of specialized service districts that cross municipal boundaries; or the amalgamation of the central city with its suburbs, whether by annexation or by the creation of an entirely new metro government. Many academics advocate amalgamation on the grounds that it promotes efficiency while equalizing municipal resources (Stephens and Wikstrom 2000); a few, notably public choice theorists, criticize it for reducing taxpayer choice (Bish and Ostrom 1973; Tiebout 1956). Currently, the jury is out.

### **Metropolitan government in Quebec**

All of these major principles were invoked when, in the late 1990s, the separatist PQ (Parti Québécois) government in Quebec launched a successful campaign to amalgamate the city of Montreal with all other municipalities on the Island of Montreal. These municipalities include the inner suburbs, as well as much territory developed since 1945. Beyond them lie the outer suburbs of the North and South Shores. Including Laval, the largest suburb of all with a population of 400,000, these have powers fully equal to that of the city. Advocates of amalgamation, including provincial politicians and bureaucrats, the city of Montreal, labour unions, the francophone media, and the Board of Trade, lined up behind arguments for social equity and, to a lesser extent, efficiency. Opponents and sceptics, led by Trent himself as mayor of Westmount, one of the inner suburbs, included most of the island municipalities and the majority of taxpayers, who spoke up for choice and local democracy.

Complicating the story, and informing the PQ's thinking to a greater or lesser extent, was a locally "felicitous by-product" (p. 15): amalgamation would eliminate a large number of predominantly anglophone municipalities, including Westmount. On an everyday basis, relations between native French- and English-speakers, who in 2006 made up 66% and 13% of Montreal's population respectively, is generally amicable, but in the background there is a politics of language and larger politics of separatism, which a large minority of francophones support. Several of Montreal's inner suburbs contain Anglophone majorities, and of these Westmount is both the most affluent and also the continuing symbol of a time, now gone, when an anglophone elite ran the city. Unavoidably, the history of culture and language coloured the amalgamation debate.

That there was a debate at all has to be explained. In the United States, local governments have constitutionally defined powers. The individual states are not able to force the amalgamation of municipalities without their consent. Although Canada, too, is a federal state, the only powers that municipalities possess are those that have been delegated by the provinces. Provincial governments have the power to create and destroy municipal governments, and there have been a number of occasions when they have merged local governments, with or without local support (Sancton 2011). In 1972, Manitoba created the "unicity" of Winnipeg by merging city and suburbs. In 1953, Ontario created a new level of municipal government, "metro", to which it assigned some of the powers previously held by the city of Toronto and most of its suburbs. In 1998, Ontario again reorganized Toronto, this time creating a single level of government at the metro scale, in effect an expanded city of Toronto. Beyond its boundaries lies an extensive urbanized territory of outer suburbs. Much the same arrangement was created by the Montreal amalgamation, partly inspired by Ontario's initiative, which took effect in 2002.

### **A demerger mayor's point of view**

As mayor of Westmount (1991–2001, 2009–), Trent not only led the opposition to amalgamation but also later instigated and, in March 2003, released the scholarly Poitras report that made demergers an issue in an upcoming provincial election. The election brought in a new Liberal government, which, with prodding, authorized referenda that, by 2006, enabled a significant number of municipalities, Westmount included, to re-establish their autonomy. Extending over more than seven years, the amalgamation issue became the subject of a protracted war, the effects of which can still be felt. Trent had led the charge; implicitly he styles himself as the David who confronted the provincial Goliath (in one of many chapter epigraphs, he quotes Shakespeare: "O, it is excellent to have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant"); and now he claims partial victory.

The issue of amalgamation can be treated analytically, as indeed Mariona Tomàs (2012a; b) has done for Montreal's war. To some extent, Trent does this too. The opening section of *Merger Delusion* surveys the principled issues at stake, the modern, fraught history of language politics in Quebec, and the character of Westmount, as he has recently helped to shape it. A 16-page appendix explores the claim that amalgamation promoted efficiency and equity; a hundred pages of endnotes document and expand on his argument; and a 24-page analytical index points to key players, institutions, issues, and moments; geographers will appreciate the inclusion of two maps, both useful (although one requires a legend). So there is plenty of conceptual substance. But the heart of this long book is a narrative of the major events, evidently based on Ambrose Bierce's understanding – also an epigraph – that politics is "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles." A blow-by-blow account, this narrative moves between the back rooms and the public arena, from newsrooms to city hall and the provincial legislature, incidentally illustrating – in this era of the voluntary long-form census – the game-changing role that well-researched and timely data can play in the political arena.

Diffidently, Trent suggests that his narrative is "part history, part opinion, and part memoir" (p. 3). It is all that, and more. To be sure, it is unbalanced. Trent's account says more about the

strategies, and behind-the-scenes strategizing, of himself and his allies than it does about the machinations of those who made and defended the merger. After all, he had unequal access to key sources. He is kinder to allies than to political opponents, passing over foibles of the former while pointing to convenient hypocrisies among the latter. He casts his arguments and actions in a generally positive light, and skips over some qualifiers. For example, he omits to mention (p. 5) that the reason why amalgamations have been rare in the United States is that, unlike Canadian provinces, states lack constitutional power to force the issue. Again, his claim (p. 526) that “your property’s value has nothing to do with your consumption” is only a half-truth. *Merger Delusion* is frankly partisan.

But as history it is much more than mere memoir and opinion. Trent was born in Britain, educated in Ontario, and elected in the supposed bastion of elite, anglophone Montreal. For all of those reasons, he might appear to be a throwback to a different era. But he was, and is, no dinosaur. He married a *péquist*e, a supporter of the separatist Parti Québécois, himself voted PQ in 1973, and helped found an almost exclusively francophone company. He knows and acknowledges that, in Quebec, “francophobia begat anglophobia”(p. 35). His judgments are nuanced. For example, although he describes Gilles Vaillancourt, the long-standing mayor of Laval with whom he “rarely agreed”, as a “wily, sphinx-like” politician who was not above offering a bribe, he speaks in the same breath of “our friendship”, claiming that they “got along well” (p. 121; p. 557, note 15). He acknowledges personal as well as strategic mistakes. Extensive endnotes suggest that he does not aim to deceive. So, too, more importantly, does his tone. He tells his story lucidly, sometimes amusingly, always passionately, and in the process straightens the record on a number of key points. Quietly, sometimes in footnotes, he settles scores. But he always speaks reasonably, persuading not hectoring, demonstrating not asserting.

### **The verdict of history**

Trent persuaded this reader that, in practice in Montreal, amalgamation was always, and remains, tarnished. It was promoted for dubious as well as for good reasons, the overall balance being unclear. Its effects have also been mixed, or worse. The impact on social equity is uncertain; it has probably reduced civic efficiency, and certainly raised costs by giving wider scope to an expensive bureaucracy and to a corrupt system of contracting by which Montreal’s municipal officials – and perhaps politicians – received kickbacks from construction companies in return for awarding contracts. The latter issue is currently the focus of a provincial Commission of Enquiry whose hearings have already led to the resignation of the mayors of Montreal and Laval. Amalgamation aggravated tensions between anglophones and francophones. Whatever the lofty principles its supporters invoked, the results have been mostly unfortunate, occasionally shameful.

Turning things around, what of Trent’s assumption that smaller is better because it provides more choice? Taken to its extreme, this line of argument helps to justify the sorts of common-interest developments (CIDs) that are now the norm in some parts of the United States. Here, small groups of households get to choose exactly what mix of services they will receive, and pay for; also, in effect, what types of people they will associate with, and who they will exclude. Trent does not broach this topic: it is not part of the amalgamation story, and as yet is not much of an issue in the Montreal area. But such developments are on the rise almost everywhere and, given Trent’s principles and experience in the political trenches, it would be interesting to hear what he thinks of them.

In the end, of course, *Merger Delusion* must be judged on its own terms. It offers a remarkable and convincing account of the interplay between civic and provincial politics, which Trent brings alive with photographs and perceptive thumbnail sketches of the protagonists. It will not change the opinion of committed amalgamationists, but it may sway the undecided. Even if they disagree with Trent’s politics Quebecers, and especially Montrealers, should appreciate *Merger Delusion* for the retrospective light that it throws on a key period in the politics of that province. It is, as a columnist

in the *Montreal Gazette* immediately declared, a “masterpiece of sober analysis of what ails Montreal Island” (Aubin 2012). Urbanists, and not just those in Canada, should welcome it as an informed insider’s account of public choice theory at the barricades. It shows why the geography of municipal politics is important, and how its study can be engrossing.

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