

# Cities and Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Lisa Helps

*Mayor, City of Victoria*

Cities have always been hubs of innovation and invention, centres of industry, and diverse, rich places of social connection and belonging. Twenty-first century cities are all this, and they're much more complex, for many reasons. This lecture will highlight some of the productive tensions between city governments and the public in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are two key trends that lead to these tensions. First, a new economy, often called a 'sharing' or 'collaborative' economy – think AirBnB and Uber – is emerging. These new economic activities are sometimes seen to pose a threat to business as usual. At the same time, they provide opportunities for regular people to engage as economic producers after a 20<sup>th</sup> century economy based largely on regular people as economic consumers. Second, a diversity of members of the public, from small business owners to people experiencing homelessness, have a desire for more meaningful participation in local government decision making. The desire is to be engaged in a continuous, two-way conversation with local decision makers. This upswing in participatory democracy is exciting. Drawing on her experience as an academic, an activist, a social entrepreneur, and an elected official, Mayor Helps will explore these issues through a local lens.

Lisa spends much of her time working in the community on place-based solutions to global and national challenges, and to increasing citizen engagement. She has an undergrad and a master's degree from the University of Victoria and was awarded a Trudeau Scholarship for her research on housing, homelessness, and poverty in Victoria and San Francisco. Her PhD research led to the formation of Community Micro Lending (rather than a completed doctorate!), an enterprising non-profit that helps to build a vibrant local economy, foster sustainable business, reduce local poverty, and empower people. She was founder and Executive Director of CML and helped to launch Canada's first peer-to-peer micro lending program. Before starting Community Micro Lending, Lisa was on the Board of Directors of Victoria's Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group (Fernwood NRG) when the Society purchased and restored the Cornerstone building, built affordable housing units, and opened the Cornerstone Café as an enterprising non-profit venture. Lisa was a Victoria City Councillor from 2011 to 2014 and was elected Mayor of Victoria in November 2014.