Conclusion

Throughout the first years of the Depression, Canadian cities stood on the front lines of urban unemployment. To them fell the mighty task of making provision for the care and maintenance of those affected by the economic downturn. Although the cities received financial support from the provinces and the federal government to aid them in that task, the concept of local responsibility—born centuries earlier in Britain’s Poor Laws and written into the cities’ articles of incorporation—left in municipal hands the primary responsibility for administering and delivering relief to the urban jobless.

But local responsibility also meant local control, however tempered it turned out to be. On the one hand, local responsibility offered city relief administrators and policy-makers the freedom to set relief policy according to their own understandings of the meanings of
poverty, unemployment, and relief. On the other hand, local responsibility compelled them to act when they could ill-afford to act and would have preferred not to act at all. It also compelled them to mediate among myriad interests whether or not those interests share their conceptions of their society’s needs. In the end, it was in the very administration and delivery of unemployment relief that cities found ways to reduce what they viewed as the Depression’s worst threats to the economic and social order. It was, in many ways, the widespread realization that the Depression was no short-term downturn that spelled the end of local responsibility. Despite the early prominence of urban authorities to the administration and delivery of unemployment relief, they gradually became less relevant to the process.

In the main, this book has explored the Depression experience through the lens of city administrators, policy-makers, and planners. The important vantage point of the (primarily) men who made and carried out relief policy reveals their biases, concerns, and anxieties about the future of their fledgling and fragile cities at a moment of extraordinary social and economic dislocation. The cities were relatively new when the Depression began. Only three short decades before, there were no urban centres on the Prairies west of Winnipeg. In the ensuing thirty years—years that can only be described as raucous—Prairie cities experienced a massive economic boom, two serious recessions, and a World War. On the eve of the Depression, the cities had stabilized, and their policy-makers confidently looked forward to steady expansion and growth. The severe economic downturn savaged them more than it did urban centres elsewhere, mainly because of their reliance on a single commodity for their survival.

The chief goal of city policy-makers through the early years of the Depression was a simple one: to help their cities survive the economic and social crisis more or less intact. They quickly discovered that “intact” was open to wide interpretation among the many groups and individuals affected by their relief policies. Neither the provinces nor the federal government, for example, had any interest in seeing cities defaulted and bankrupt—cities were, after all, the economic, political, and cultural engines of the nation—but neither did they want the cities becoming too...
big a drain on their own shrinking coffers. Urban businesses were understandably interested in their own economic survival, and their keen following of the supply side of local relief policy for opportunities to feed the relief machinery reflected that interest. Community groups—including community leagues, ethnic, religious, and cultural organizations, and media representatives—asserted a wide array of opinion about how best to deal with the unemployment problem. And, finally, relief policy affected most intimately the unemployed relief recipients. Relief administration and delivery both governed and was governed by the ways in which recipients and society in general responded to relief policy.

Those who ran the city relief machines drew up rules and regulations and protocols to address the Depression’s most severe effects, and relief authorities hoped that these would soften the hardships faced by so many while at the same time safeguarding the cities (and more specifically, the cities’ sense of themselves). City governments organized their relief administrations according to two main thrusts. First, they worked to distinguish between single and married men, as well as between men and women, in order to promote specific—and highly gendered—values. Single men, for instance, could expect less from city relief than could their married brothers because for the most part, they represented danger rather than stability and responsibility. Similarly, women, whether single or married, could expect less relief than their brothers could—whatever the latter’s marital status. The urban Prairie society’s ambiguous relationship with unemployed men, and especially with the ways it conceived of manliness and of men’s relationship to work, is also revealed through the cities’ work relief policies. Work relief helped to cast unemployed men—that is, those who did not receive work relief—as lazy, as paupers, as broken, as shameful, as dangerous, and as frauds. Society needed protection from them, but the men themselves needed protection from want and starvation and, perhaps more importantly, from the idea of unemployment and all its attendant consequences that together undermined his manliness. Men on work relief were the last bastions of normalcy in dangerous days, but they were the very cause of dangerous days when they were not. The unifying theme and the guardian against danger, then, was work.
Marital status clearly meant a great deal to municipal policy-makers during the 1930s. Relief policies set single men, together with women and ethnic minorities, on a second-tier welfare track even while they maintained married men on the first tier. Policy decisions about where different welfare applicants fell on the hierarchy of relief, then, reveals not only the status that policy-makers accorded to relief recipients, but also what threats policy-makers believed each category of relief posed to the patriarchal and capitalist industrial order.

City bureaucrats also ran their work relief systems in what they imagined were “pragmatic” and “practical” ways, always trying to streamline operations and make them as efficient as the machines they believed them to be. For the most part, officials preferred to view work relief as productive labour, as work that contributed to projects their cities needed to complete, rather than as boondoggles designed to keep otherwise idle men busy. Work relief was, in other words, work, not charity. City engineers and city planners ran their work relief projects much as they had run general city infrastructure building earlier in the century. They discovered, of course, that in many ways work relief brought with it its own peculiar logistics, created in part by restrictions on labour and materials imposed by senior levels of government, as well as by the fact that relief workers had varying degrees of skill and experience. Direct relief systems operated according to similar principles, with city officials generally creating relief policy with an eye to economy.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, prevailing conceptions about single unemployed men versus married ones, in tandem with a solid liberal faith in the work ethic, played a crucial role in the administration and delivery of Depression-era unemployment relief. This is not to say that ethnic and class considerations had no influence on the character of city relief machines. However, in comparison to the gendered and liberal ideologies that have been the focus of this book, issues of ethnicity and class do not figure as prominently in city records, local newspapers, and federal and provincial reports, perhaps because ethnic and class biases were widely shared among city elites and therefore required little comment or debate. The overriding concern of city officials was rather to ensure that all unemployed married men would continue to be able to
support their families and otherwise carry on as they would in normal economic times. Implicit in this goal was the assumption that social stability rested on the male breadwinner model, an ideal to which men and women of all classes and all racial and ethnic backgrounds should be encouraged to subscribe.

This book is the result of an effort to understand the mindset of local elites in three relatively small North American cities struggling against extraordinary circumstances. I have argued that although those circumstances were undeniably difficult, city officials wrested all that they could from them. But this book has also been about the men, women, and children who had little choice but to live with the policies that city officials put in place. For businesspeople—both small and large—city relief policies often set up barriers, but they also offered opportunities. For community leaders, those same policies posed challenges that prompted them to voice their constituents’ concerns. And, for the unemployed, city relief initiatives produced a system to be analyzed, negotiated, and ultimately manipulated so as best to serve their own needs.